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The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe

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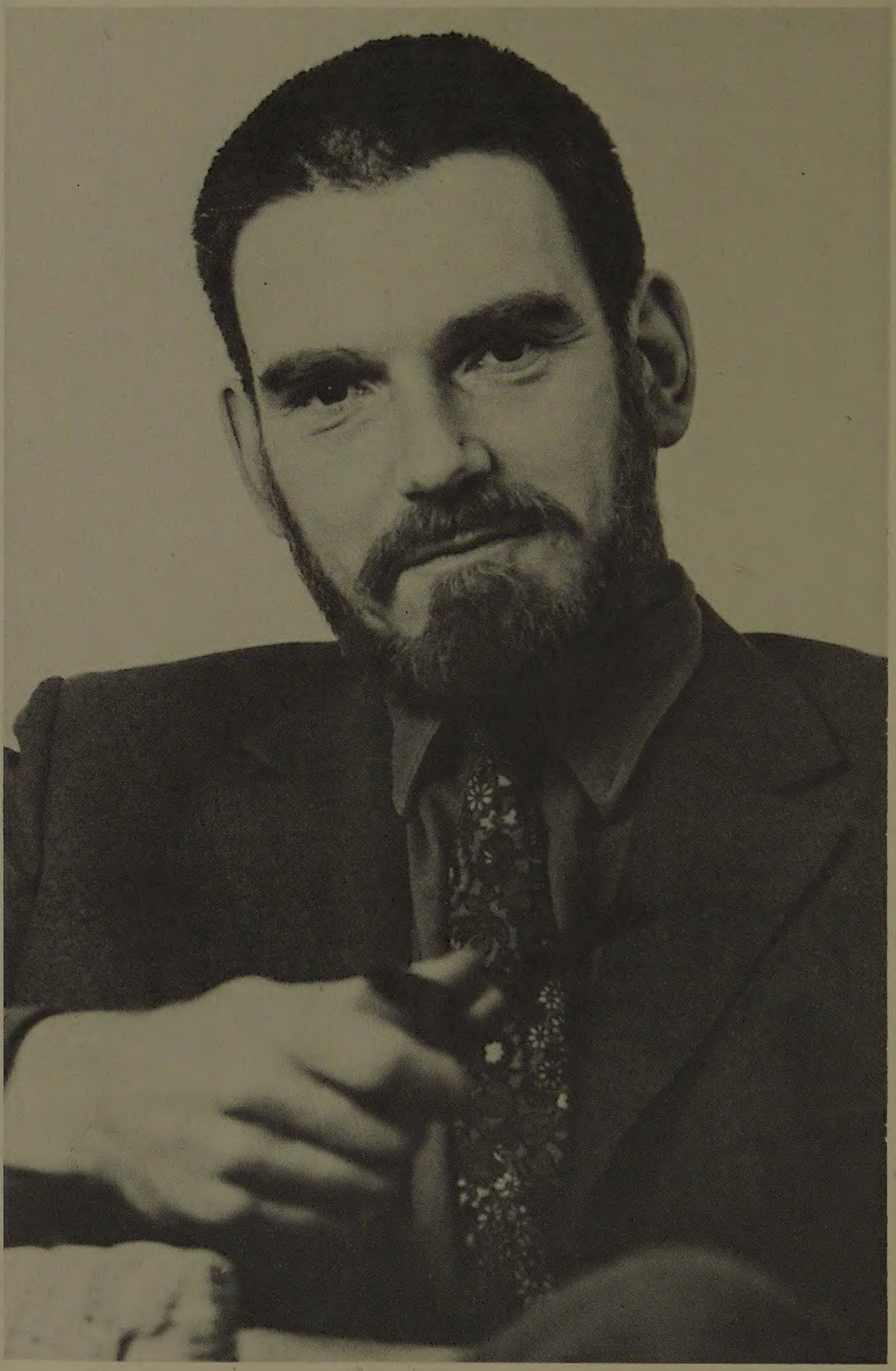
The Continuous
Katherine Mortenhoe
by D. G. Compton



The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe

D. G. COMPTON

With a New Introduction by
SUSAN WOOD

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INTRODUCTION

IN DAVID GUY COMPTON'S novel *The Unsleeping Eye* (1974), one of the two central characters, Katherine Mortenhoe, also contemplates writing a novel:

> *A book about people as they really are. Neither despicable nor honorable, since neither term applies. . . . Neither abject nor dignified, since these are irrelevant concepts. Each one simply chemistry, simply a bundle of neurones, each bundle equipped with an internal communications system built up down life's millenia for reasons mostly long obsolete, and disrupted randomly by the imperfections of the reproductive process. . . . My book will contain the only truth, that there is no truth, and it will make me famous. I shall write it possibly in the hospital, possibly dictating the last chapters as I die.* (p. 15)

As she is dying, her companion Roddie tries to explain to her ex-husband that she is suffering from "outrage," already described by her doctor as a kind of psychological nausea produced by an outstanding sensitivity rebelling " 'against a person, against a single event, against a whole life-style' " (pp. 23-24). Katherine pretends not to understand, and Roddie persists: " 'Then there's your book. . . . From what Peter told me there was outrage in every—' " (p. 215).

D. G. Compton writes books with outrage in every quiet line. The story of Katherine Mortenhoe and Roddie, while presented in science fictional terms, is, like Compton's other SF novels, a psychological study and an expression of outrage against a society which will not allow people to live as individuals.

The Unsleeping Eye is the North American title (New York: DAW Books, 1974) for *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe* (London: Gollancz, 1974 and Arrow paperback, 1975). It was Compton's eighth SF novel (see Bibliography on p. *xx*). He is also the author of a mainstream novel, *The Palace* (1969) and a number of plays. In this, as in Compton's other works, the science fiction elements are a convenience, offering a new perspective on contemporary life; and a metaphor for his painstaking and often painful examinations of humanity. His settings are consistently a new future (only *Farewell, Earth's Bliss* [1966] takes place off Earth, or indeed outside England). We can recognize it as our world, with a few convincing extrapolations (statutory minimum workhours, Leisure Fulfillment Courses, the National Data Grid and Civil Liberties saboteurs) and one major difference (the creative computer in *The Steel Crocodile* [1970; Gregg Press edition, 1976], the recording and reproduction of emotions in *Synthajoy* [1968; Gregg Press edition, 1977], and the retinal TV cameras of *The Unsleeping Eye*.) The impersonal city of identical flats, each square "dedicated to a newer, brighter lie" (p. 57) in which Katherine lives echoes the ultramodern, empty Gloucester of *The Silent Multitude* (1967) and the controlled London of *Synthajoy* and *The Steel Crocodile*. The society, with its well-regulated surface, its underlying violence, its hypocritical affirmation and real denial of human values, its massive programmes of social welfare which its hordes of "fringees," "alienees" and other misfits reject, and its ultimate meaninglessness, is also familiar to readers of Compton's books. This society serves as the mask for the nakedly self-serving world of the Martian colony in *Farewell, Earth's Bliss,* in which group survival is achieved by the sacrifice of such values as compassion, creativity and questioning; and for the equally self-serving hypocrisy and ruthlessness of such demagogues as Vincent Ferriman, head of NTV, the man behind the "unsleeping eye."

The virtual elimination of natural death, and thus of the dignity and purpose it can give life, is a subject Compton deals with in *Synthajoy,* for example, in which old Mr. Stech, suffering from "Archetypal Death Wish," chooses to die rather than live meaninglessly—as does Abigail Oliver's grandfather in *The Steel Crocodile.* In *Synthajoy* too, the pianist Paul Cassavetes seems to *choose* a paralytic fit, to escape Dr. Cadence's "reason-

able" request that he sell his soul, his unique gift, to Sensitape. In *The Missionaries* (1972), one of the aliens says: " 'Death proves life. So does pain. Ever hear of a computer feeling pain?' " (Ace edition, p. 99). On one level, she seems to be voicing their unconcern for human beings. On another, she is expressing a truth borne out by the sufferings of all Compton's central characters, including Katherine Mortenhoe who must learn that she is much more than a computer.

In particular, in Compton's work, the central plot device exists, not just as an idea in itself, but as a metaphor. In *Chronocules* (1970) and *The Steel Crocodile*, the isolated and insular research centre reflects the detachment from humanity, and from human morality, of the scientists who play God—for whom the all-knowing computer is an ideal new messiah. In *The Silent Multitude,* the alien fungus destroying Gloucester suggests the unquenchable life revolting against the city's sterility, a life embodied in the four oddly assorted individuals who, like rats, remain within its crumbling walls. Similarly in *The Unsleeping Eye,* the transformation of a decent reporter into "The Man With TV Eyes" suggests a society which denies its members their right to individuality, privacy and dignity. Like *Synthajoy,* the novel it most nearly resembles in concerns and in moral outrage, *The Unsleeping Eye* becomes an exploration of the freedom to discover oneself, to be oneself.

The North American title focuses attention on Roddie, a TV reporter whom his ex-wife Tracey denounces as " 'the man who sold every farthest corner of himself to the square-eyed monster' " (p. 167), and whom his boss Ferriman mocks as a man with " 'the makings of a conscience' " (p. 109). His psychiatrist sees him as " 'an outsider,' " a man whose " 'alienation is not basically from other people but from [him]self' " (p. 73). He comes to understand himself as "a reporting device. . . . the world's morbid curiosity made flesh," (p. 175), yet also a man who can "buy back what [he] had sold" and become "free" (p. 194).

Roddie is a reporter, who has himself half-convinced that he is looking for truth when his boss and the public want sensationalism. To further this search, he has undergone surgery which planted TV cameras in his eyes, paired with removable sound gear, all run by a nuclear power pack in his neck. As a result, he cannot sleep (thus can neither escape into necessary dreams nor explore his subconscious self), cannot close his eyes (though he does his best to ignore the reality of what he is doing) and cannot

refuse to transmit anything he sees. An early reference to "*my* eyes" (p. 7) is pointedly ironic, since they belong to NTV; at a reunion with Tracey, he can neither confess to her ("Vincent there behind my eyes said no") nor make love to her ("Vincent there behind my eyes said yes"—pp. 62–63).

Yet the Roddie who willingly works with Vincent as he prepares, the perfect camera, to film the death throes of Katherine Mortenhoe is a mixture of honesty and self-deception, self-knowledge and self-loathing. Half the book is his confession, his self-justification. "It will be noticed that I was at that time very much concerned with the truth," he says, as he begins his real report on "the only true, continuous Katherine Mortenhoe" (p. 5). Later, he insists on his awareness, emotional calm and sobriety as he makes his final decision: "I suppose I insist on this because I am in many ways proud of the detestable, self-mutilating thing I did, and won't be given excuses" (p. 193). His contradictions—which lead to this act of "self-mutilation" which makes him whole again—are clear when he first describes his responses to his role as "the man with the TV eyes":

> Mostly it felt marvelous. I was, after all, a reporter. I had suffered under the exigencies of camera and lighting crews all my professional life. The presence of a camera takes people in different ways—some people are good and some are bad, the best are careful and the worst are carefully uncareful. Scientists claim that the very act of observation alters in some subtle way the nature of the phenomenon being observed. When the phenomenon is people and the observer is the grasping lens of a camera the ways aren't all that subtle. To be free of all that was marvelous.
>
> Also it felt important. I was important. . . .
>
> I was, after all, a reporter. Like Reuter, with his carrier pigeons. I was presented with the most staggering tool for truthful reportage the world had ever known. . . . The price was high, but so were the satisfactions. Three years would see me just beginning. Not in terms of fame, for that would follow instantly on the first press release, but in terms of technique. In terms of (though I was shy of the word), in terms of artistry. The death of Katherine Mortenhoe, no matter how challenging, was only a start.
>
> Then again, it felt outrageous. I was a surgical monstrosity. A cyborg. I had been violated. I had offered myself willingly for obscene experimentation. I had given up my self, given up a right even to the ultimate privacy of my senses. I was a public man. What I saw, every voyeuristic hack by the receiving monitor would see. . . .

> That then was the price, and that the satisfaction. I was public property, and utterly alone. (For who could trust me with secrets, either of body or mind?) And I had within my head the possibility of greatness (pp. 27–28).

It is, of course, Katherine's own refusal to become "public property" or the object of "obscene experimentation" which restores them both, and gives them both true "greatness."

Roddie's first assignment is to film Katherine Mortenhoe's approach to death, for NTV's Human Destiny series. Again, his reactions to these serial broadcasts of other people's sufferings are complex. The ten hours of misery he sees are "strangely moving," since, he claims, the programmes "all aimed at total truthfulness about the human condition" (p. 40). His introductory description sounds like a publicity brochure:

> Each was an open-ended half hour series, often—especially toward the ends of the terminal subjects—screened daily, and probing frankly and honestly into the mental and physical states both of the prime sufferers and of those family or nursing staff who accompanied them on their anguished journeys. They were sagas of human endurance, of the human spirit in extremis. Every one of them was a memorable viewing experience (p. 40).

Of course, truth cannot be contained in an edited half hour, but Roddie is not ready to accept this consciously. Instead, his interior monologue unconsciously reveals the truth; the programmes feed a sensation-hungry public:

> Detractors of this level of truthful reportage always claimed that constant exposure to the spectacle of suffering dulled the sensibilities. The point about the suffering in the Human Destiny shows was that it was progressive. It could continue to excite horror and compassion because there was always a new agony in store (p. 41).

Finally his mind escapes judgement altogether in a "professional" detachment:

> For me there would be logistic problems, of course. Being my own camera was an inestimable advantage in terms of spontaneity, but it limited the angles. It meant that I would have, in some measure, to

compose the scene in advance, and cut and direct it as I went along. Vincent would naturally reshape my material. . . (pp. 41–42).

Yet Roddie is more than a camera transmitting an edited "objective" truth; he is a man seeing subjective truth. Seeing the true, continuous Katherine, he confronts the schism between her public and private selves, which is also the schism within himself and between himself and the world. First, he watches Katherine, not as a "subject," a bagful of "director's tricks," but as a woman. He sees the angry desperation with which she receives the doctor's news of her impending death. He sees also, as she decides how to escape the merchandisers of her misery, a woman who dances, a woman who contains "the possibility of joy." Seeing her, he too begins to feel this "possibility of joy" (p. 59).

Yet Roddie, isolated and vulnerable in the trappings of his position, an expensive car and clothes, is suddenly the cause of real human suffering; he kills a woman protester, seriously injures a man, and is set upon by an angry mob and by police. A long night in solitary confinement, contemplating his guilt and society's corruption as Vincent engineers his release, leads him to self-examination. The 420 minutes are "more than enough when all your life has is an ambition you've seen through, a hope you dare not examine, and a direction you'd rather not guess" (p. 116).

Roddie does indeed have the makings of a conscience. This night confirms it, as does the next, watching Katherine in the hostel for derelicts. The next morning—Easter Sunday—as the Vicar celebrates early morning Communion, Roddie makes an explicit connection between this sacrifice and Katherine's fate, for which he is agent, Judas. He offers to help her escape, rationalizing that "by cheating her rotten we were doing her a favour" by keeping the police away. This time, however, he acknowledges that "I doused my conscience" while preparing his "old honesty-between-friends spiel," and sees himself helping Katherine with one hand "even as I stabbed her painlessly in the back with the other" (p. 142).

The orgy in Corydon Rondavel's mansion confirms Roddie's realization that NTV and the society it represents are corrupt, and that all people want is a degrading spectacle, a rape, a "peep-show" (p. 163). It also focusses this loathing outward, so

that, freed from himself, he is able to help Katherine and to feel love for her. She is now seriously ill; yet what Roddie "sees" is her dignity and determination. She leaves their stolen car to bathe in a stream; this scene is presented from two different perspectives:

> I should have left her to wash in private. But there was an old-masterishness about the scene that I couldn't resist. . . . Besides, our relationship had never been one of old-fashioned constrictions. To have looked away would have been a denial. We were too close, and far too wise. Not, of course, that all these complicated rationalizations went on in my head as I stood there by the bridge. I stayed because, at the time, I didn't think of not staying.
>
> If I need further excuse, I can only say that this was obviously the way she saw it too. For she knew I was there, and she took off her robe without fuss or display, and let it float away on the current. . . . Now the body of a forty-four-year-old woman is supposed not to be beautiful. Even less beautiful, therefore, the body of a frequently paralytic, hallucinating, incontinent forty-four-year-old woman suffering from a terminal syndrome. To deny this assumption is to be accused of ludicrous romanticism. Facts, after all, are facts. So I'll just claim, and be done with it, that at that time, in that place, I found the sight of Katherine Mortenhoe washing her thighs, her arms, her shoulders, her breasts, to be right. Not beautiful, perhaps, but utterly right. Which has always been, to my mind, as good a definition of beauty as you'll find.
>
> The water bit into her, coldly purging her. Her trembling was glorious, not a rigor but her body's innocent reaction to the teeming, sunlit water. Washing herself, she noticed her brown nipples huge with the cold. She didn't hide them from the strange young man who leaned on the fence and watched. He was more than simply a man and she a woman. They were both of them human and, unreasonably, she found that somehow magnificent. To turn away would have been an insult (p. 171).

Yet the lyricism, trust, and suggestions of baptism and return to innocence are Roddie's and Katherine's human emotions, filters between the scene as the mechanical camera eye sees it and the human minds perceive it. Earlier, talking of the "truth" of the Human Destiny Shows, Roddie has described the pitiful, squalid details of a man having a fit before "the cool eye of the camera," as if their human content meant nothing more than good television:

These were the moments a reporter might wait a life-time to capture. These were the moments the Human Destiny show came up with time and time again.

And the ratings showed that NTV was right in judging the public's deep unconscious need. Its life was false, prettified into a bland, painless, deathless advertiser's dream. The public wanted, and deserved, to be reminded that this was only a half of life, the half allowed by technology to run wild (p. 41).

Suddenly Roddie is confronted with the reality of the public's "deep unconscious need" for sensation, for victims, for something to look down on. At 8:30 on a Monday evening, in a pub, he *sees* "the continuous Katherine Mortenhoe," the life he has turned into a series performance:

You see, beauty isn't in the eye of the beholder. Neither is compassion, or love, or even common human decency. They're not of the eye but of the mind behind the eye. I had seen, my mind had seen, Katherine Mortenhoe with love. Had seen beauty. But my eyes had simply seen Katherine Mortenhoe. Had seen Katherine Mortenhoe. Period.

And my eyes had seen a dribbling, palsied wreck. My eyes had seen a ponderous, middle-aged woman capering unsuitably about a beach. My eyes had seen her filthied clothes. My eyes had seen her lumpy, graceless body lumber naked out of a pretty-pretty stream and stoop for the towel so that her breasts swung like pale, water-filled bladders. The sarcastic wolf whistles of my fellow-drinkers are still with me. This was how they saw her. When she wasn't repulsive she was pathetic. I knew her to be neither.

But it was I and I alone who had assembled through the medium they tell us cannot lie definitive evidence that she was just that: either repulsive or pathetic, and often both. Evidence that had been seen and believed by maybe sixty million people.

I loved her. If that was the word. And there was no other (pp. 192–93).

Finally distinguishing between man and machine, mind and camera eye, Roddie chooses blindness and freedom.

At the novel's end, the reader is given a rare glimpse of the man behind the eyes, behind the face "that was my external measure of self" (p. 6). Katherine Mortenhoe, continuous, has returned to her first husband Gerald, whose name she has kept

as an indication of "a relationship fourteen years deep, interrupted but not yet ended" (p. 217). She remembers his strength that "came from being all of a piece" (p. 220). Then she thinks:

> Roddie's strength was different. It was without reason, obstinate in the face of self-disillusionment. It came from an intuitive certainty that beyond all the fragmentation there was still the possibility of . . . wholeness. It had faltered, and taken wrong turnings, but it had never lost faith in the possibility (p. 220).

By returning to Gerald, who left her as an "armoured cruiser," she reaffirms her own new wholeness, her humanity which he acknowledges in his respect for her and her choice of death.

Thus the British title, *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe,* focuses attention on both central characters and their quest. Roddie, Katherine and the reader all search for "the one, true, continuous Katherine Mortenhoe." Ironically, this title can refer to the series Roddie films, Tuesday through Monday night. Yet through filming this series, Roddie does discover truth, beginning when he stops searching for the *one* Katherine and simply accepts her: "What would emerge, would emerge. And a lot of it, surprisingly, was going to be fun" (p. 143). What he, Katherine and the reader learn is that she is continuous, of a piece, the product of her whole upbringing and society: of a father who ignored her, dumping her with stepmothers; a husband who left her; another husband without the courage to help her; a lifestyle in which friendship seems impossible (Katherine and Peter's work relationship has lasted an unusual three years); and a world in which the Human Destiny shows are popular. No wonder she feels "outrage." Moreover, she is not isolated, but continuous with the rest of life. Roddie sees this, first, with disgust. Caught in a mob, Katherine screams. In a photo, she and her tormentors are "indistinguishable" (p. 86). Yet Katherine, like Roddie a perpetual outsider in an alienating society, comes to accept this connection with joy:

> She experienced herself. She was one. She was as old as the soil beneath the grass beneath her feet. She was home. She could have gone on living forever—one breath after another was all that was needed—but it seemed much more reasonable, and gentle, and wise, to die (p. 220).

In accepting death, she finds wholeness and freedom; in so doing, she allows Roddie to find these qualities and begin to live a morally responsible life.

Initially, then, Katherine, like Roddie, is presented as a machine. Her father dismisses her as an ideal computer expert: " 'No flesh and blood. . . . No fucking enthusiasm' " (p. 83). (Ironically, it is he who cannot feel. After a life spent leaving wives and turning out formula SF books, a job which could be done better by Katherine's computer, he commits suicide after seeing her, on TV, dancing on the beach.) Katherine's husband Harry sees her as reliable, nonmysterious, a provider of expected comforts. Having given up novel-writing, she works—really works, far beyond the statutory minimum of 20 hours a week—programming "Barbara," a computer which writes romances. When Dr. Mason, whom she trusts as a human "way inside the professional carapace" of the Medical Centre (p. 10), and perhaps inside the mystery of life itself, explains that "Gordon's Syndrome" will cause burned-out neural circuits, she thinks: "Burned-out circuits. . . . It reminded her of poor Barbara" (p. 24). Yet she is more than " 'very much a mechanism. . . very much running down,' " (p. 215), and more than an "armoured cruiser." Dr. Mason tells her that Gordon's Syndrome affects only rare people of great sensitivity, and she believes him. Ironically, he is lying and she is in no real danger—but her sensitivity and belief produce the appropriate symptoms. Yet that same sensitivity (which Vincent Ferriman has, in effect, used to murder her before his cameras) *does* lead her to discover dignity and humanity, as she makes positive choices to understand her life and define the manner of its end.

Before this is possible, however, Katherine must face betrayal and a loneliness deeper than that she has chosen. Her reaction to Dr. Mason's news (the first betrayal, though she does not know this) is to pull a "shutter" or "screen" over her anger. Roddie, watching her through a one-way mirror (the second betrayal) sees her real face, "white, empty, painful," then

> no more than a series of director's tricks: women watching themselves in mirrors, women flailing and wailing, women saying fuck. It diverted me (and distanced me) to wonder which had come first, directors watching women's tricks or women watching directors' tricks. Certainly human behaviour had changed since the coming of TV behavior (pp. 24–25).

She, watching herself, "imagined Barbara sorting phrases," and acts as a woman in a romance might be expected to act, or as the doctor might predict:

> She watched herself cry, watched in the mirror, watched herself change, her face lose its pinched-up shape, her elbows cease to matter, and was pleased with the tragic effect (p. 22).

This distancing from herself and her physical symptoms, necessary for herself as well as Roddie, breaks down as she becomes progressively alienated from those around her. When she discovers that Harry Blount, her husband, has taken Vincent Ferriman's money, she reacts with revulsion and "fury [to cure] her shame." She tells him that " 'I want to be married to someone else, Harry. For the last twenty-seven days of my life I want to be married to someone with courage' " (p. 49). Her cathartic rage at Ferriman and Dr. Mason leads her to positive planning. The scenes in which she determines to cheat Ferriman in his own terms, to provide money for Harry since that is what he really wants, reveal her genuine sense of humor. Nevertheless, there is a bitter edge of irony, since Harry has contrived to slip a transmitter into her handbag so she cannot really escape.

Yet Katherine still thinks of herself as a machine. "Organisms wore out, broke down, stopped. There was nothing to make a song and dance about" (p. 56). Rage and turbulent emotions can also be programmed into Barbara, as Katherine sets up a book programme which Peter will complete to produce " 'something fantastic,' " something " 'Huge. Savage. Angry' " (p. 100). What cannot be programmed is something more human, more rare in Katherine's "progressive" society: repugnance, revulsion, at death and at the intrusion of others into "the one human activity still able to receive [the] privilege" of privacy (p. 47). When Katherine calls Vicar Pemberton's Dial-a-Church number and announces that she is going to die, he immediately asks " 'What have you taken?' " She replies, " 'I've taken umbrage' " (p. 34). Similarly, when Ferriman writes to her about his "proposal," her reaction is to affirm that she "would die in private" with as much dignity as possible:

> She was not afraid of Vincent Ferriman's rationale, his reasons, for she knew she was beyond them. If she met him or spoke to him, it would be her body that rebelled, not her mind. And her body would make her throw up on his feet (p. 47).

Of course, Ferriman engineers her cooperation, leaking her name to the media so that her privacy is invaded and she is mobbed and kidnapped; eventually she has little choice but to turn to him for protection. Yet she attempts, at least, to do so on her own terms. In the same way, when Mason offers her a pill-happy life-in-death, she reacts with outrage, nonrational and deeply felt. "The people he had shown her frightened her more than death itself" because they have lost their ability to perceive reality, and their free will (p. 99). Like Thea Cadence of *Synthajoy* and Abigail Oliver of *The Steel Crocodile,* she cannot verbalize or rationalize her disgust and horror at this negation of the individual. Slowly, she is learning that she has been wrong in thinking that human beings are only machines and that "there [is] no 'truth' in human emotion, only differing degrees of chemical imbalance" (p. 15). Unlike other Compton characters, she does, in the end, find words and actions to express her humanity.

Dr. Mason's actions confirm for Katherine that "Wherever she was, whatever happened to her, she now had no one to turn to. Which was, after all, the historic animal condition" (p. 99). Yet she is only accepting the condition she has known all her life. Roddie, "the outsider's outsider," finds her "a puzzle. I'd seldom come across anybody with so few contacts, so few friends, so little family" (p. 101). Nevertheless, all the distancing screens—"Vincent Ferriman's hot property, Dr. Mason's terminal case, Peter's Katie-Mo, her father's fucking nuisance, Gerald's armoured cruiser, John Peel's pickup, Harry's newly hard person"—finally drop away to leave Katherine Mortenhoe the self-reliant person, who escapes (she thinks) "into the dream . . . into a world where there was only she" (pp. 122–23). Thus, "free from everyone except herself," she is "free, exultantly, to explore that particular bondage" (p. 129). She is also free to acknowledge that solitude, cold alienation from others warmed only by "her woman's pride," is not enough (p. 144). In the refugee camp in the church, she chooses to make human contact with Roddie. As her body breaks down, her humanity emerges: her animal nature in all the physical symptoms suggested to her by Dr. Mason, her emotional and spiritual self in an affirmation of her individuality and her need for others. She is not property; nor is she a machine since " '*they don't have self-knowledge. . . . I'm a bit more than a computer, Rod. I have self-knowledge. I under-*

stand what I know what I know what I understand' " (p. 163). Roddie, too, is becoming more human, though she does not yet know this. When she does learn that he, too, has betrayed her, her initial revulsion gives way to acceptance of their common vulnerable humanity. She asks him to stay with her because "They had, one way and another, both been hurt enough" (p. 201). All that is left is for Roddie (and Gerald) to give her, and for her to accept, her own death as a private act, an affirmation of her own truth. Against Ferriman's cynical manipulations of "truth," Compton—who shows Katherine's death from the inside, with understatement and no sensationalism—presents the real, true, continuous Katherine Mortenhoe, in all her complex humanity.

Compton frequently uses religious motifs, notably in *The Steel Crocodile, The Silent Multitude* and *Farewell, Earth's Bliss*. In *The Unseeing Eye,* they are subtle but effective touches, suggesting a human world beyond Vincent Ferriman and Harry Blount, where faith is more than a chemical reaction. The action involves eight days, Tuesday through Tuesday. On the seventh day, Roddie chooses self-mutilation, not rest, darkness not light. Above all, he abrogates his godhood, letting Katherine live and die rather than "creating" her life for the TV screen. This compression, however, is primarily a plot device, creating suspense.

More significantly, the novel's action takes place over Easter, the Christian celebration of death and rebirth, based on pagan spring festivals. Roddie first begins to see Katherine as a human being with meaning for his life when he sees her, near sunrise, "Out in the street, forty-four, with four weeks to live, and dancing," embodying "the possibility of joy" (p. 59). He, too, is filled with this possibility:

> Perhaps the spring was really for humans once a matter of externals, of cuckoos and poetic crocuses. Or perhaps it's always been what it is today, an affair in the blood, a chemistry even the largest city cannot arrest, a process that bends one's perceptions till even oneself can be almost beautiful. . . . Only in spring is the flesh new and the spirit incorruptible (p. 60).

He goes, with this feeling, to Tracey, his conscience; and thus begins his process of rebirth, completed through Katherine's death.

Equally, Katherine Mortenhoe offers a condemnation of her society. As previously mentioned, Roddie makes an explicit connection between Christ's sacrifice and Katherine's an association borne out by the behavior of the mob, the students, and even Mrs. Baker on the beach, who react with anger and fear to her uniqueness—and to whom she unknowingly offers the salvation of becoming fully human in a private world. Roddie comes to see himself as "the world's morbid curiosity made flesh," (p. 175) and Katherine as a sacrifice whose death, says one reporter, is something she "owes" to the public: " 'They're pain-starved. It's a serious psychic deprivation' " (p. 55). Her triumph is to keep her death her own; Roddie's is to regain his life, finding integrity through self-sacrifice.

Compton's style also underscores his concern with the individual. Roddie's story is told in first person, past tense: his confession and account of his self-discovery. Roddie could easily seem to be a monster, the living embodiment of the society which denies individuality and privacy—especially to him, its agent and chief victim. However, first person narrative creates understanding and sympathy for the man trapped behind the eyes. Moreover, Roddie initially thinks he can know "the truth" about a given individual, but as his own story reveals one can only know oneself, from the inside, after painful introspection.

Katherine's story is told in third person, as befits the woman who begins as a machine to herself, a name and case history to Roddie, and a media object to millions. Yet the narrative technique is third person center-of-consciousness, so that the reader, while distanced, shares Katherine's perceptions and reactions more closely than Roddie can. The difficulty of knowing another person is emphasized, again, by the third-person shifts outside Katherine's mind, chiefly in conversations and in the closing sections which depict Vincent in the studio searching for Katherine and Roddie.

The reader's initial perception of Katherine is of a "genteely neurotic" woman with her capsules for tension and her overwork (p. 11), "five-foot-nine, twice married, forty-four, with a face like a female politician and a figure she didn't think much of" (p. 42), trapped in a futile life with a husband who "wasn't all that much of a catch and knew it" (p. 14), saving "for a self-contained domestic unit in a good retirement area" (p. 69) in a society which, by encouraging idleness and subsidizing the

"fringies," seems to make "her life of honest endeavour . . . suddenly pointless and quite unnecessary" (p. 114). Of course, dying, she too is a misfit, even her death unnecessary and apparently pointless since it is her own mind which destroys her body. Only her own individual choice gives it meaning; and only the presentation of her through Roddie's eyes as he comes to love and respect her, and through her own as she reaches understanding, can convey that meaning. "She experienced herself. She was one" (p. 220). Only Compton, by providing many perspectives, internal and external, on Katherine can suggest that unity.

Compton thus writes the book that Katherine, as a divided individual, cannot. In the early days of her last week, attempting to assimilate the doctor's news, Vincent's and Harry's treachery and the reporters' morbid curiosity, she escapes

> to the comfort of her book, to the dignity with which it would present the bitter truths of human nature. No, the *neutral* truths, the *chemical* truths of human nature. The need to persecute the oddball was one of these truths. . . . Greed was another. . . . Deceit was another. . . . (p. 53).

What Katherine learns, and what her story presents, is the belief that human truth is not neutral, it is personal: Robbie's love and concern, for example, really do transform Katherine and himself. It is not chemical, or mechanical: it is mysterious and subjective, and Katherine, as a woman, embodies it. Above all, truth is not bitter. Against the mob's hatred, Harry's greed and Vincent's deceit, Compton sets Peter's selfless love for his Katie-Mo, Tommy Tucker's individuality and kindness, Tracey's fidelity and Gerald Mortenhoe's wholeness. The novel's most serious flaw is that these latter two characters, especially Gerald, are not developed fully enough, so they remain symbols of goodness rather than living examples. Gerald says he likes working with children because " 'They're free to expect something bigger' " than their society offers (p. 216). Ultimately, both Katherine and Roddie discover that something; and with their story, Compton offers, not the bitter truth of human nature, but the equally true possibility of joy.

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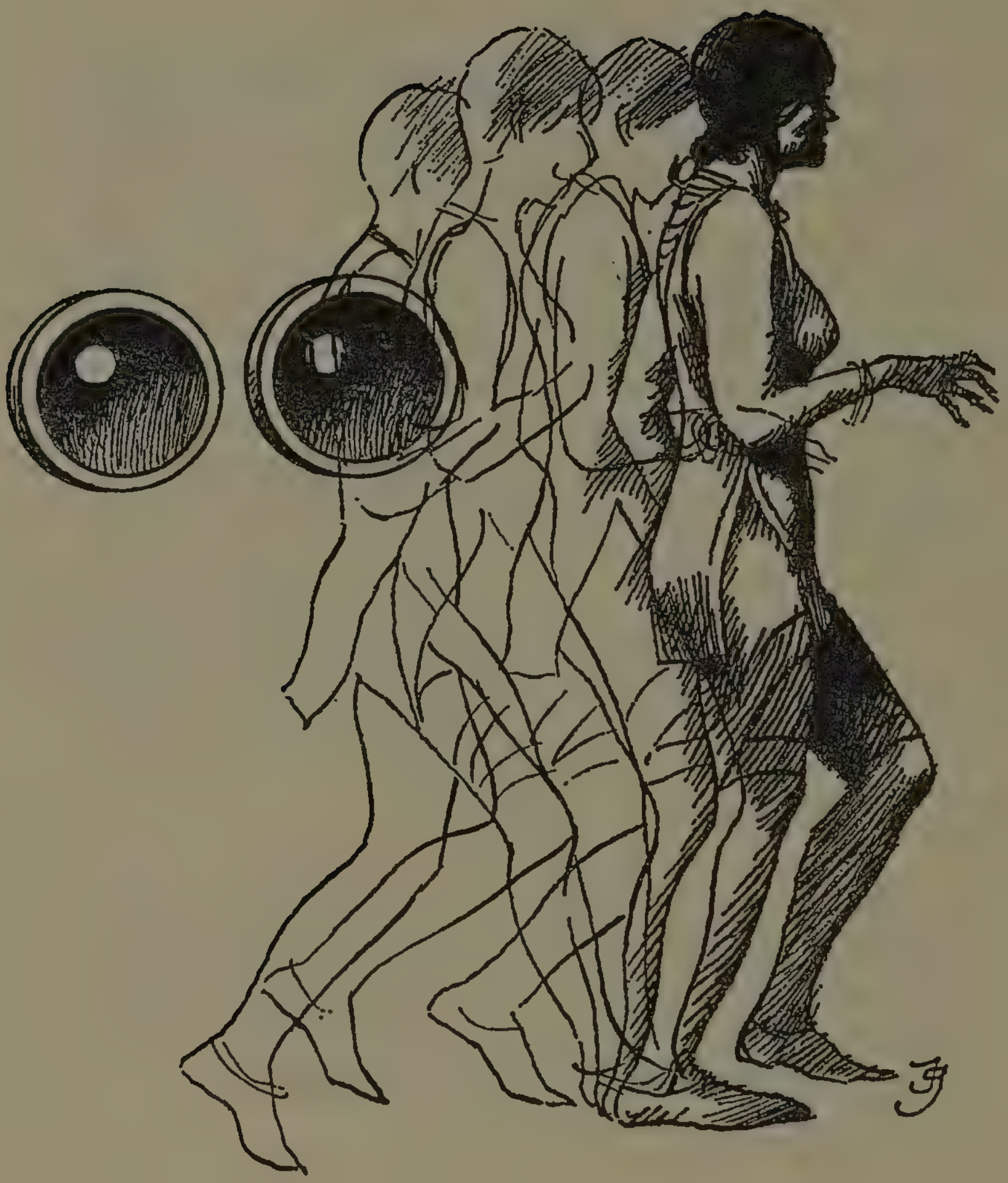
I was a surgical monstrosity. A cyborg. I had been violated. I had offered myself willingly for obscene experimentation. I had given up my self, given up a right even to the ultimate privacy of my senses. I was a public man. What I saw, every voyeuristic hack by the receiving monitor would see. My tapes could be played back for the cheap delectation of office boys. My finest moments were common property. And those less fine . . .

If I closed my eyes or stayed in complete darkness for any length of time, the implanted retinal microcircuits would overload, and pain would force my consciousness into light again.

That then was the price, and that the satisfaction. I was public property, and utterly alone. (For who could trust me with secrets, either of body or mind?) And I had within my head the possibility of greatness.



ONE *Tuesday*

Katherine Mortenhoe. . . . So now I had a name to work on, and a case history. I also had NTV's background report. The last two would be of little help. The facts in the case history and the background report—chopped arbitrarily, like photographs, out of continuous time for the neatest of reasons—were therefore untrue. Untrue, that is, in the largest sense.

The name was more useful. Mortenhoe being the surname of her first husband retained into her second marriage and preferred for some reason to her maiden name, it must at least be indicative of *something*. . . . Affection for Gerald Mortenhoe, perhaps? Or for the state of being Mrs. Mortenhoe, of having been Mrs. Mortenhoe? Or possibly simply indicative of a need to be polysyllabic. Her second husband's name was far duller.

I was picky over the name because it was all I had to go on, all I had that was continuous and entirely hers. I had this thing about continuity, you see, having long ago decided that people were only true when they were continuous. As an attitude, an approach to my job as a reporter, it had done me very well. It had got me where I was at that moment. Also it was a game that filled in the time nicely until the arrival in the flesh of the only true, continuous Katherine Mortenhoe.

It will be noticed that I was at that time very much concerned with what I saw as the truth.

I had read the case history and the background report over coffee in the NTV canteen. The facts in them, partial though they were, had aroused in me a compassion that regrettably my more recent thinking about the name was rapidly dissipating. I was coming down in favor of the need to be polysyllabic, and that sort of status-seeking bored me. Now I

sat with Vincent and waited for the only true Katherine Mortenhoe to appear on the other side of the one-way mirror. I don't remember that I asked him his opinion of the matter. I had prejudices enough for both of us.

Monkeys seldom sit. Likewise, only even less so, bare-assed Homo sapiens, man in the Garden, man before the Fall. His rump just isn't that tough. So it might be said that the ease with which today we park our bald and flaccid bums at the slightest excuse represents the finest flower of our civilization. Be that as it may, at that time whenever I sat and became aware that I sat I felt squalid. I felt lax, despicably passive, as if my ass were some gigantic parasitic sucker clapped onto the rest of creation. I would fidget. I would lift apologetically first one side and then the other, proving it wasn't really so. I would fancy I could hear the plop.

"Nervous?" said Vincent, smiling his smile.

Since I had in fact been thinking entirely about the name Mortenhoe and what it might signify, the shifting had to be a neurotic reflex. I settled both cheeks firmly to suck.

"I just hope I'm not going to hate her," I said.

"I never mind a bit of involvement. You know that." Vincent liked his interviewers taking a positive attitude. It made for brighter viewing. But the program we were planning this time was rather different. If the thing went according to plan, and Vincent's things always did, I was going to be sitting on Katherine Mortenhoe for the next six weeks.

"I'd rather like her," I said. "For both our sakes."

And that was how I really thought of it—sitting on her, I mean. Which shows just how subliminal you can get. Vincent lit a cigar. It was put about that he had them custom-rolled for him. Put about by whom, I wondered.

"Just so long as you steer clear of the mush," he said.

He was joking, of course. They wouldn't have spent that much money on a mush-merchant. . . . I remember looking up at the monitor in the corner above the one-way mirror, and finding it still disturbing that I shouldn't see in it the face I had seen in lash-up studio monitors from Nova Zembla to Bankok. The face, eyes off camera, that was my external measure of self. For what it was worth: faces too were pretty horrible things if you really looked at them. But there, still disturbing me, in the monitor in the corner above the one-way mirror was a picture of the monitor in

the corner above the one-way mirror. And in that, a picture of the monitor in the corner above the one-way mirror. And in that . . . But where, in all that mirror trickery down to infinity, down to the smallest significant pattern the tube's 605 lines could produce, where in all that was I?

Idiotically, I tried looking away, and then back again quickly, as if I could catch it out. I knew it was idiotic, but I tried. The image naturally (unnaturally) remained the same. In the monitor above the one-way mirror, the monitor above the one-way mirror. I closed my eyes. *My* eyes.

When I opened them again I looked instead through the mirror into the office beyond. Dr. Mason had his ball-point upright on the desk in front of him. He slid his thumb and forefinger down it, then turned it the other way up and slid his thumb and forefinger down it again. If I concentrated on my peripheral vision I could just make out the monitor image of Dr. Mason as he turned his ball-point the other way up and slid his thumb and forefinger down it again.

Image-framing, they called it. Fiendishly clever, these Micro-Electro-Neurologists. MEN for short. Which, if you've ever met one, is one of my better jokes.

"Headache?" said Vincent.

I didn't envy Dr. Mason his first bite at Katherine Mortenhoe. With what he had to tell her, and bearing in mind her previous case history, he could expect flailing and wailing. Suffering nobly born would bring out the best in me, and I'd willingly hold out a (professional) hand in its direction. But suffering wallowed in, suffering without dignity —in short, flailing and wailing—would shut me right off. It was like an animal's—except that animals you are allowed to put down.

"Are you still getting those headaches?" Vincent said, a little louder, frowning his frown.

I'd had more than enough of people asking me about my headaches, about the tingling in my extremities, about my nasal passages, about the frequency of my bowel movements. If I'd listened to them I'd have walked around the last three months with one finger on my pulse and the other up my rectum. And made half-hourly reports on what I discovered.

So, "Only when I laugh," I said, but not sharply. Vincent was my Program Controller.

The mirror must have been thinner than it should have been: Dr. Mason cocked his head on one side and winced. As if he were the one with the bloody headache.

Vincent nudged me. "She'll be on her way up now," he said. It was a ventriloquial trick, the words reaching precisely to me and not a centimeter farther, while his lips barely moved and his eyes were fixed on the far corner of the room, a trick learned at cocktail parties and official executions.

I turned to him and said, loudly, "I thought this mirror was supposed to be soundproof."

Dr. Mason looked sideways in my direction, not at my eyes as he would have done if he could have seen me, but farther down, somewhere around the knot in my tie. He shook his head reprovingly and I'm afraid I put my tongue out. Vincent pretended it all wasn't happening. Dr. Mason went back to his ball-point, sliding his thumb and forefinger down it and turning it the other way up.

"It would have been marvelous," Vincent said, invisibly, "to have been able to use this. We tried a reconstruction once, you know. But it doesn't work."

"I know."

"It wasn't that it lacked spontaneity. And the chap was most cooperative. He seemed genuinely to be reliving it. The agony, you know."

"I know."

"But we couldn't use it. We knocked it around the office a bit, and then said no. Use just one reconstruction and you've lost. Lost credibility."

If I'd said "I know" just once more I'd have been pushing it. Taking advantage of my position. A man, a *sensitive* man, who is fire-proof in an organization has an obligation to be mannerly. . . . They could see to it that I never worked again, of course, but it wouldn't get them much of a return on their investment. And they'd never get the insurance company to pay up the fifty thousand they had on me. On the reliable, *sensitive* me.

"It's a pity," I said instead, "that there isn't some way of signing subjects up in advance. Telling them some story, just to get their names on a bit of paper. Then we could use it right from kickoff."

"Now you're suggesting that we mislead the public."

We both laughed, neither of us—at that time—with the slightest shade of irony. The idea was preposterous. Even if we'd wanted to, which I at least, with my concern for the truth didn't, even if we'd wanted to the idea was still preposterous. The Civil Liberties Act, the Invasions of Privacy Act, the new Government Code, all these made—and still make—the game on the face of it not worth the candle. The legislation was basically of our own making, and for our own protection, and we'd have been mad to think of bucking it. That way led straight back to Stevenson's Last Stand, and that—though we media men made jokes about it—wasn't funny. Not that it hadn't been his own fault, but one still doesn't like to think of that sort of thing happening to a colleague.

I wondered, in passing, if he'd ever got his mike out from where I'd heard they put it. Possibly Vincent's thoughts had been following mine, for we both laughed again, though less easily.

The intercom buzzed on Dr. Mason's desk. "Mrs. Mortenhoe to see you, Doctor."

He put away his ball-point, checked in his desk for the computer printout I'd seen him put there not five minutes before, blew his nose, wiped his eyes, and cleared his throat. He was leaving nothing to chance, our Dr. Mason.

"Show her in, please," he said.

His checking for the printout had reminded me of probably the best computer joke I'd heard. There's this fella, see, goes along to his doctor for a diagnosis. Spots, pains, odd sensations, you build up the middle bit how you like —symptoms the wilder the better. Anyway, the doctor writes it all down, and feeds it in. Long pause. Flashing lights, whirling tapes, clicking relays. Finally the computer spits out one of those long blue diagnosis printouts. Only this one's only got seven words on it. Just seven words. "That's marvelous," the fella says. "What's it say?" The doctor passes the printout across his desk. The fella doesn't dare look. "Tell me," he says, "tell me what it says." The doctor looks down at the paper. "There's—a—lot—of—it—about," he reads.

I had time, before Katherine Mortenhoe came into the office, to wish that her computer, too, had had a sense of humor.

Suddenly, out of the blue, the Medical Center had rung her.

Always, in the past, it had been she who rang them. Always a little ashamed, and therefore sharp. Naturally Dr. Mason was a busy man, but she was busy also. And she, not he, was the neurotic. And if he didn't prescribe some new capsules for her (placebos, whatever they were) she doubted if she'd be able to carry on to the end of the week. She was proofreading the new Celia Wentworth or Aimee Paladine or Ethel Pargeter—always a preempting self-mockery in her voice—and it had to be in by Friday. And always they were very kind, and fitted her in the same afternoon.

There were other things she didn't say. That her work was demanding and creative, for example. That it wasn't any use imagining that because you had a computer you just sat back and let it do all your thinking for you. That she was responsible to the Board for the running of her department. (Peter was a nice boy, and bright, but he didn't know a plot loop from a denouement phase.) That in fact she *was* her department. . . . These were things she didn't say, for they were the cry of every petty bureaucrat and organization man from the beginning of time.

These she saved for Dr. Mason's ear alone. He knew her, and knew she had no need to bolster herself in the eyes of others.

And then, suddenly, out of the blue, there was the telephone call from the Medical Center. They said they saw she was booked for the following Tuesday, and were just confirming arrangements.

She'd made no such booking, she said, and she was sure there must be some mistake.

They agreed that a mistake was more than possible, but said the slot was available all the same. Perhaps she'd like to make use of it—periodic chats with one's doctor did no harm, they said, even if one was as fit as a fiddle. ("They" was actually a youngish man, and kind sounding. But his kindness was professional, and he'd been engaged on its account. Her only way through the professional carapace was Dr. Mason, who cared.)

She didn't argue, but said she'd be there, and made a note in her desk diary, and immediately forgot all about it. Or, more precisely, misremembered it, edging it forward in her

mind to Wednesday, which was also the day she was having her hair done. For she knew perfectly well, and faced the fact bravely, that there was really only one possible reason why Dr. Mason should ask to see her. The Center didn't make mistakes. If Dr. Mason wanted to see her it must be because she was ill: not genteelly neurotic (highly-strung, her grandmother would have said), but ill. Physically ill.

She toyed briefly with the idea that she was dying. It was dramatic, but unlikely. It was what came of having a novelist's mind—of, if you like, being a novelist. It was a graceful idea, charmingly old-fashioned. In the real world practically nobody died of anything except senescence. For God's sake, at forty-four she was a long way off that.

She told Harry about the Center's phone call that evening, after dinner, while they were loading the dishwasher. She dropped the news in very lightly, believing it was he she was sparing. He froze, a clump of dirty cutlery in his hand.

"What do you think they want?" he said.

"They don't *want* anything. I told you. They more or less admitted it was all a mistake."

"That's all right, then." He smiled at her, and bent down to put the cutlery in the holder. But he didn't believe her.

"My dear man, if they say it's a mistake, I'm sure that's what it is. After all, you of all people must know the sort of mess these big offices get into."

"Of course I know." He racked plates while she watched him, then closed the dishwasher and started it. "Anyway, a chat with Mason won't do you any harm. You always feel better when you've been to see him."

"Meaning that there's never really anything the matter with me."

"Nothing physical, Katherine. We both know that."

As if to prove his point she felt the approach of one of her fits of dizziness, and the familiar tightness around her head. Not exactly a headache, more a feeling of tightness, as if her scalp were shrinking. How she hated people who thought and talked of nothing but their health.

"The computer may have come up with something," she said.

He was drying his hands. "Don't you wish it would? The physical things are so easy these days." He dried his hands carefully, as he always did. Then he carefully threw away

the towel. "Chess?" he said. "I can always get on with my model if you'd rather."

"I've brought home some proofs."

"You'll sit and brood."

"Barbara needs them by Friday."

"Come down to the Hobby Room with me."

"I shall take one of my capsules and work in bed."

He was already on his way out of the door. "Take two," he said, over his shoulder.

She leaned against the kitchen table. "My appointment's for ten-thirty," she called after him. "I'll ring you afterward. Ten-thirty Wednesday. The day I'm having my hair done."

He came back, and smiled, and kissed her forehead which he could reach, and went away again.

She'd met Harry across the desk of a License Bureau cubicle. He was a green form, and a pen, and a necessary rubber stamp. Her marriage to Gerald was up for its second five-year renewal, and he wasn't renewing. She had no Basis for Discussion—even if she'd wanted one—for there were no children and she was a Grade I wage earner in her own right. Gerald hadn't warned her of the nonrenewal. The official notification was simply in the box one morning when she went to the Post Office to pick up her mail, together with the form for her signature. And that evening he didn't come back to the flat after work. He never came back to the flat again, but sent a friend for his things. The friend told her, unnecessarily, that Gerald couldn't go on living with what he described as "an armored cruiser." She was not so much shocked as astonished.

Harry had helped her to fill in the simple form and—more importantly—had provided someone with whom she could share this astonishment. He was far too straightforward a person to have guessed it might be the cover for something more. Just by way of something to say, or possibly to comfort her, he'd mentioned casually that he was in the same boat himself. A nonrenewal at the second option. . . . Of course, it was harder for her, harder for the woman—everyone knew that. But he'd heard his ex-wife was getting along very nicely. The cases weren't quite the same, mind, the nonrenewal being her idea not his, but there hadn't been another man or anything like that, and his ex-wife was finding her new status in society quite pleasant. There were plenty

of clubs and associations. His ex-wife had been a great one for clubs and associations.

At first Katherine had suspected the whole story of being a social worker's ploy. But the name of the ex-wife in a social worker's ploy would have tripped readily off the tongue: it wouldn't still, months after nonrenewal, have been too painful to speak even. This betokened a faithful heart. Besides, the man in front of her across the desk had been obviously no social worker. He'd been too evidently lonely. And too undevious.

She reasoned that in his daily work he must have had to deal with dozens of women in her situation. Therefore she allowed his unusual concern to flatter her. Further, she allowed him to take her out to things, ostensibly to meet other people, other Newly Singles. They went to parties, and lectures, and on a couple of cultural exchange trips. After the first two or three outings he stopped even pretending to introduce her around. They discovered a common interest in chess: he a follower of Moldenev, and she of Fu Tsong. So they sat at the back of the meetings and played, and thought how silly they were to go home afterward to their separate beds.

There was never a formal proposal on either side. They were both over forty, and both with a tenth year nonrenewal which, in spite of all the theories, was far harder to adjust to than a fifth year one. He was impressed by her work—she was completing Barbara's phrase memory banks at the time—and she . . . she was sorry for him in his. It had been easy for them to fall into a sort of love.

And now they were already only a few months off their first renewal.

There was nothing wrong with their relationship. He read now, and not programmed books but the classics. He no longer sniffed. He kept his modeling things down in the block Hobby Room. He was faithful and kind, and the flat with him in it was never cold to come home to. They showed each other things, and enjoyed their holidays together. And he'd learned to hold his ejaculation off beyond the first six strokes.

There was, therefore, nothing wrong with their relationship. Except that it was a repeat of both their previous relationships, and if they were going to make it work this time it was because unconsciously they both knew this and were

wiser now. They were going to make it work because life was long. They were going to make it work because the world of the Newly Singles was brassy and competitive. And they were going to make it work because they both believed (while never either of them actually doing anything about this belief) that one day something else, something really exciting would happen, and that until it did, until he, she, did, the present arrangement was a great deal better than any conceivable other.

And now they were already only a few months off their first renewal.

Left alone in the kitchen after Harry had gone down to the Hobby Room, she was reminded, with a twinge of anxiety, of the impending renewal. They'd talked about it, of course, and been in total agreement. But it now occurred to her that if Dr. Mason's news were bad enough, then perhaps Harry would be tempted to change his mind. She knew that sickness provided a Basis for Discussion: she could apply for a stay, if nothing else. She also knew that Harry was anyway far too delicate ever to voice such doubts as he might have. He was, in spite of his simplicity, perhaps because of it, a very delicate man. But a continuing relationship on such terms would be unendurable.

The tightness around her scalp intensified, and the whirr of the dishwasher seemed to take away all her powers of concentration. She left the kitchen and rummaged in her case for the Ethel Pargeter proofs. Then she took two of her capsules, as Harry had advised, and went to bed.

In the quiet of the bedroom, while she was waiting for the capsules to take effect, she decided that, whatever Dr. Mason said, she would tell Harry everything was fine. Furthermore, she would choose surgery rather than a prolonged drug therapy—she could always pretend a short business trip to cover hospitalization. Even if the risks of surgery were high, she'd still accept them. For Harry, a dead wife would be better than one he hadn't the heart to nonrenew.

Ten minutes later her mood had lifted, such was the chemistry of moods, and she knew that Harry would wait for her gladly, no matter how long her therapy took. He loved her. (He also wasn't all that much of a catch, and knew it.) She propped up the proofs on her knee and took out her ballpoint. . . . By the time Harry came in from the Hobby Room she'd checked thirty pages and really quite enjoyed them.

Ethel was the frankest of Barbara's three personae and in consequence Katherine was now feeling deliciously sexy. People might laugh at these old-fashioned romances, but there *were* marriages that survived half-a-dozen renewals, and fellatio at forty-four wasn't simply an old maid's dream.

With the day of her appointment firmly, safely, fixed in her mind as Wednesday (the day she was having her hair done), she endured the waiting period of wild emotional fluctuation as best she could. She reminded herself that neither the peaks nor the valleys were necessarily "true": there was no "truth" in human emotion, only differing degrees of chemical imbalance. Opinions and decisions—matters of faith even—were likewise a matter of chemistry, of electrochemical interaction. Although well-known facts, these were naturally to be carefully excluded from the (frank) programmed pages of an Ethel Pargeter.

One day, as Katherine watched spring put whiskers and tiny flowers on the moss on her office windowsill, she thought, *I must really write my own book. A book about people as they really are. Neither despicable nor honorable, since neither term applies.* . . . She drew patterns on her jotter. *Neither abject nor dignified, since these are irrelevant concepts. Each one simply chemistry, simply a bundle of neurones, each bundle equipped with an internal communications system built up down life's millennia for reasons mostly long obsolete, and disrupted randomly by the imperfections of the reproductive process.* She scrubbed her jotter and began other patterns. *My book will contain the only truth, that there is no truth, and it will make me famous. I shall write it possibly in the hospital, possibly dictating the last chapters as I die.*

She was the Romance division of Computabook. It cocooned her, kept her warm. If she had ever read the literary magazines she would have known that such novels as the one she projected were published, micro-fleched and racked away every week of the year.

On Tuesday morning, however (as she had known he would?), Peter had to come and destroy the subtle fail-safe mechanism she had constructed around the sensitive matter of Dr. Mason's appointment.

"Outies at ten," he said. "Or had you forgotten?"

She didn't hear him. Ethel Pargeter now behind her, she was at the title stage of the new Celia Wentworth, and she

did not hear him. She'd demanded six reruns from Barbara, and still she wasn't satisfied. Incapable of impatience, Barbara was mulling over the seventh.

"Outies at ten," Peter said. "Surely you've looked in your diary?"

For some reason she hadn't turned over the pages of her diary since the previous Friday. Barbara ticked, and put out a small, polite blue tongue. *A Fit for a Queen,* Katherine read. She crumpled the blue slip and threw it away, then reached for her jotter. It had to be her fault Barbara had missed the epilepsy connotation: she must check the cross-associations in the word store. Apart from that it was neat. Every young girl's dream. *A Fit for a Queen.* Very neat.

"Mason, ten-thirty." Peter had leaned across and turned the pages of her diary for her. "So outies at ten. You don't want to be late, love."

And then she could be angry with him, angry for everything that Harry and Gerald, that her father and her stepmothers, that Dr. Mason and the kind youngish man at the Medical Center, angry for everything that life and the whole vile function and malfunction of her oozing woman's body had ever caused her to endure. For his interference in her private, utterly personal affairs she could justifiably be very angry indeed.

And then she could go, raw and unprepared, shaken—horrified even—by the intensity of her anger, hiding in the logistic misery of the journey (how much of city life was concerned with the weary process of getting from one undesirable place to another?), then she could go, without pause, to her appointment with Dr. Mason in his office on the fourth floor of the Medical Center. The event could creep up on her unawares. Which was by far the best way.

Not that it mattered, she thought, waiting for her last connection. It was ridiculous, really, going to all this trouble for an appointment that was entirely the result of a clerical error.

She could be angry again when told by the receptionist that today Dr. Mason wasn't in his usual office, when sent up to a room on the sixth floor instead. Bundled about like a parcel. And his new room, when she reached it, was nasty. As she might have known. It was mustard-carpeted, soothing, with expensive teak-faced furniture and a mirror along one wall, not like a doctor's office at all. She caught

a glimpse of a woman in the mirror and found it difficult to connect the image with her own vivid sense of self.

Pinched up. All elbows. Was that really how she appeared to others?

You will remember I had this thing about people only being true when they were continuous. Put differently, that taped snippets taken out of context could be made to prove anything, it was of course a truism. But I used words like existential, and continuum, and realismus, and got the job. Got the vision implant. (What an innocent phrase that was.) Which wasn't in the least immoral of me, for I honestly believed—and still do for that matter—that I was a far better man for that particular job than any of the other runners.

In practice, what all this theory boiled down to was that, as far as the viewer was concerned, he never got even the shortest interview without a dozen or so inserts over sound, taped by me over many days or weeks or, ideally, months. He got the true, the continuous person. And as far as I was concerned, it meant that I totally disregarded first impressions. People grew, filled out, became real and true only as they went along. My first sight of Katherine Mortenhoe, therefore, was unmemorable.

Presumably I stared at her while she stared at herself, at the herself in the mirror between us. Vanity? I don't remember judging either way. I have no clear idea of what she looked like at that moment, or of what she was wearing even. Undoubtedly her clothes were those she was wearing five or ten minutes later when my impressions began to clear, but my recollections of that first moment are hopelessly overlaid by the Katherine Mortenhoe, the continuous Katherine Mortenhoe, that I came over the next six weeks to know and, yes, in some fashion, love. The only true (I believe) Katherine Mortenhoe.

"Come in, Katherine. Glad you could make it."

"I don't like this new place they've given you."

"It's only temporary. We've got the decorators in downstairs."

"The decorators?"

We were taping the conversation. She sounded incredulous. Or disappointed. I was to go over the tape later, interpreting and reinterpreting her smallest intonation.

"Sit down, Katherine. Tell me how you've been getting along."

"I nearly didn't come. They said over the phone it was all a balls-up."

"I must speak to Appointments about their language."

" 'Balls-up' was mine." Somehow she used this line to sit down on. And even at the second repetition the word still wasn't hers. "Well?" she said. "Was it a balls-up?"

A direct question, but fearful. I've always admired Dr. Mason's reply: using one established lie to evade another.

"I hate being forced to see my patients in rooms they aren't used to," he said. And then went on quickly before she could pick at it. "How's Barbara? I hope you're not feeding her with words like 'balls-up.' "

"The words for the sexual parts"—she seemed to be quoting—"are pure and beautiful, and only to be used in situations of purity and beauty. Moonlight . . . golden sands . . . Italian olive groves. . . . How, in fact, we'd all like to think of them."

"I suppose that's what you tell Peter."

"That poor boy. . . ." Mason knew how to keep her moving, moving away from why she was there. "You know, Doctor, he has some very strange ideas of purity and beauty. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, he says. I tell him poetic descriptions of oil refineries at sunset are no good at all. Half our readers work in them. Homo or hetero, they're all the same—they want to be told the world is a beautiful place. Tell them the world they know is beautiful and they'll spit in your face."

I was risking opinions—far too early, of course, but Katherine Mortenhoe was one of those people (when would I ever learn?) you can read like an open book. She was a romantic. She thought of her vocabulary as manly, and used it as a device for getting on in what no doubt her father had described as a "man's world." There weren't many of her left. She had the romantic's distaste for the present, and the romantic's belief in some other time, either past or future, that had been or would be better. It was going to find her, with her love-is-all-so-who-needs-a-bra-type clothes, very difficult to work with. I thought.

Dr. Mason let her talk, then led her around, without much difficulty, to her symptoms over the last few weeks. These were formidable. She discussed them readily enough, al-

though—again in the romantic tradition—only in the most general terms, as if palpitations or cloudy urine or double vision were likewise pure and beautiful, only to be thought of in situations of purity and beauty. They were quite unreal to her, closely related to the vapors and discreet declines of her Victorian models.

Then she burst into tears.

Certainly I'd been expecting flailing and wailing, but hardly as early in the session as this. I thought of the White Queen who got all her crying over well before she was hurt. But Katherine Mortenhoe was no White Queen. Before, during, and after, if I knew anything . . . Beside me Vincent tried to knock ash that wasn't there off the end of his cigar. He wasn't, like me, embarrassed. Other people's emotions excited him.

"What is to become of me?" she said. But the pretty period effect was ruined by soggy Kleenex.

"Aren't you rushing things a bit, Katherine?"

"I can't go on pretending."

"Pretending?"

"Pretending not to know why you got me here."

He could have blocked even that. I was glad he had the grace not to.

"An administrative balls-up wasn't all that improbable." How easy it was to be gentle, when you were god. "There was a fair chance you might have believed in it."

"You knew me better than that, Doctor."

He offered her his hands. "What was I to do?" he said.

"You needn't have kept me waiting." God's lies were quickly forgiven. "You could have seen me at once."

The delay had been our fault. It takes time to set these projects up. . . . I think that was the moment when I began to hate Katherine Mortenhoe for what was going to happen to her.

"I'm sorry, Katherine. It's like a madhouse here. I fitted you in as soon as I could."

"I'm here now. So get on with it."

He did things with his hands, reached in the drawer of his desk for the printout. "It's rather complicated. We ran a check program, just to be sure."

I was seeing her now. She was calm, her tears in abeyance, and unafraid. Her attitude was nunlike, one of submission before an expected (deserved?) chastisement. I

liked "nunlike." The viewers would like it too. But she and I both had a long way to go.

"I don't want the technicalities. Just tell me."

"As I said, it's rather complicated."

"I want surgery."

"It's not as simple as that."

"I want surgery, whatever the risk."

"Listen to me, Katherine."

"Surgery, Doctor. There's my renewal coming up. It must be out of the way before my renewal."

"Katherine, listen to me."

But she was listening to herself. "He's too kind. He'll renew out of kindness. So it's got to be surgery. He mustn't renew out of kindness. I want surgery, whatever the risk."

He let her run down. I saw that the nunlike calm depended on her chastisement being what she had decided was just. I doubted if even she, so romantic, had enough guilt for the real penance.

Vincent nudged my arm and grinned. He must have guessed I needed encouragement.

"Katherine, you must understand that no surgery is possible."

"But that's nonsense. It's always possible."

"People like to think that. Unfortunately it's not entirely true."

I told myself the scene had overrun. Bad movies always choked me up. It's horrible the way bad movies choke up most people far more than reality. It's the simplification, I suppose. Certainly my feelings for Katherine Mortenhoe at that moment were laughably simple.

"A few weeks in the hospital, Doctor. I could easily manage it." She battered like a moth.

"Stop it, Katherine." It helped them both for him to be angry. "Stop it. There is no cure for your condition. You must listen to me. There is no cure for your condition."

For a moment, before the shutter went down, I saw her poor face. Vincent had said he didn't mind a bit of involvement. He was going to get it.

Her skin pricked. All over she felt so hot.

She didn't ask Dr. Mason what he meant. Neither did she argue. She understood him instantly, what he was telling her, and she believed him because she had always believed him and he had always been right. He was her one way through

the professional carapace. . . . To the new truth she applied the old shift, moving it away, relating it to anxieties she could understand. She thought of the renewal.

"How long have I got?" she said.

"We should have contacted you earlier."

"How long have I got?"

"The check program held things up."

"How long have I got?"

"Not very long."

"How long?"

"According to the computer, four or five weeks."

It was suddenly terribly unfair that he should be so cross with her. It wasn't his renewal they were talking about. He, lucky man, had been married fifteen years. She decided it was time Barbara did another of Aimee Paladine's doctor books.

"Thank you for telling me." Aimee's doctors were definitely more sympathetic. "If it's only that long, then I shan't have to worry."

"You must try to understand—"

"I do understand." She smiled to prove it. "Well, we all have to die some time."

She stood up, crumpled her Kleenex, and threw it into the bin by his desk. "Well," she said again, "I'll be on my way, then. There's a lot of things to see to."

Quite final. She was going. She wanted to go. Then he stood up also. "I think you should hear me out," he said. "I want you to understand your condition. And the progress you can expect in your symptoms."

"Will they be messy?"

"Sit down, Katherine. You must realize that this has been a terrible shock. It's no use pretending anything else. It would be better if you talked about it."

"I am talking. I asked if my symptoms would be messy."

But she sat down. He was expecting her to cry again. Crying was supposed to be therapeutic. It was strange to think that she would never cry again. She turned and stared at herself in the mirror: she didn't *look* like a woman who would never cry again. She looked just like the woman she had seen in the mirror some ten minutes before. She imagined Barbara sorting phrases: *Was it really only ten minutes? Only ten minutes that had changed Amanda from a vigorous, beautiful woman with all her life before her, into*

a gaunt, walking corpse? "Walking" corpse was strong, of course, but it had gone down well in the past.

"Is that a one-way mirror?" she asked.

"What an odd question."

"It's just that I feel I'm being watched. . . . I don't mind being watched. I expect I'm worth watching. Something special. You know?"

"One in twenty million."

"I thought so. Nobody of my age dies very much."

"You asked me about your symptoms."

"Go on—tell me about my symptoms."

"It is necessary first of all to understand the atypical nature of your physiological and psychological condition."

Understand the atypical nature of her physiological and psychological condition. . . . "Fuck your long words, Doctor," she said, having only four weeks. "Just fuck 'em. For me. Will you? Please? *Please?*"

And then, but not to oblige him, she cried.

She cried for Harry. She watched herself cry, watched in the mirror, watched herself change, her face lose its pinched-up shape, her elbows cease to matter, and was pleased with the tragic effect. She was crying precisely, exactly, and solely for Harry—who would cry in his turn for her, but not enough.

"Basically, yours is an affliction of the brain cells, Katherrine. Or rather, of the circuits connecting them. In physical terms, these connections are breaking down: a condition that snowballs once it reaches a certain point, and is quite irreversible. We used to attribute this condition solely to information overload, and postulate inherent physical limits to the amounts and speeds of image processing possible in the human brain. Exceeding these limits over lengthy periods induced a complex of symptoms we called Gordon's Syndrome. After the famous pathologist. Our difficulty was in differentiating between true Gordon's Syndrome, which was terminal, and the more usual stress conditions that were not. . . ."

Outside the window she could see the topmost branches of a tree, misty with tiny yellow-green leaves. She cried for these instead, but decorously now that Dr. Mason thought he had her attention, poor little things in a world with only four weeks to live.

". . . We now understand that information overload is

only half of the picture. True Gordon's Syndrome occurs only when the breakdown of neural circuits is accompanied by certain psychological phenomenon. Very subtle and far-reaching phenomenon. For want of a better word, I must call it *outrage*. The wave patterns it produces in the brain are unique. The nearest we have found to them are the patterns produced during acute physical nausea. But in the case of true Gordon's Syndrome the nausea is not physical, but psychological. It induces, instead of abdominal spasm, a species of neural spasm. This aggravates the neurological overload already present to the point where nerve-endings burn out, circuits become permanently destroyed."

No, the little leaves would go on after her. Of course they would. Everything, everybody, would go on after her. She turned back from the window, and nodded intelligently. Quite clear. Neurological overload. Destroyed circuits. She got her mouth back into the shape it had been before she started crying, and began to make a list in her head of the people she would tell. Darling, it's the neurological overload, you see. It's the burned-out circuits, he says. They're like permanently destroyed . . . The list of people was like her Christmas list: it started long and got shorter upon examination. Upon examination it was found to have names, but no faces. Even her father's face was vague, blurred by the stepmothers in between. She moved around: jobs, flats, districts, cities. The names moved around also. Did you send cards to, did you mention neurological overload to, people whose faces you couldn't remember?

"I'm not suggesting that this sense of outrage is conscious, Katherine. I'm sure it lies much more deeply than that. All we know is that on a fundamental level it has caused you to resist. When you refuse to accept a physiological reality—in your case, neural overload—the prognosis is bad. In your case, recurrent seizure. Cell damage. The computer shows a clear pattern. Irreversible. And cumulative."

Harry. She'd have to tell Harry. But he thought her appointment wasn't until tomorrow. She could tell him then. Or perhaps even later. Or perhaps not at all. A Celia Wentworth heroine would believe things weren't really real if they weren't really talked about.

"You possess outstanding sensitivity, Katherine. I hardly have to tell you that. Somewhere along the line that sensitivity has rebelled. Against a person, against a single event,

perhaps against a whole life-style. And a pattern has been established, gradually gaining momentum. . . . I hope you understand that we cannot help you. And I hope you understand why."

She noticed that Dr. Mason had stopped. He appeared to think he had said enough. Burned-out circuits. . . . It reminded her of poor Barbara. In two years, the last two years, three hundred Wentworth, Paladine, Pargeter volumes, each fifty thousand words to page proof stage in fifteen minutes; each first impression of ten thousand blocked and bound within four days, three million books, a hundred and fifty million Wentworth, Paladine, Pargeter words. Poor Barbara.

She tried not to be angry with Dr. Mason. It wasn't his fault.

"My symptoms," she said, watching herself in the mirror. "You were going to tell me about my symptoms."

The symptoms went on and on. After a while I couldn't listen. It was as if they were to be mine almost more than hers—which in a sense they were. Mine, and through me the pain-starved public's. I wasn't looking forward to the experience. I'd seen her face before the screen came down, and I'd seen that face before.

It was the face of my son. Before we'd learned to listen for his tiny noises, in the days when we didn't go up to him in his cot until our own bedtime, often after eleven, by which time the hairy monkey behind the curtains and the white owl on the cupboard that would both come down on him if he ever dared to shout for help (come down on him and do exactly what I never discovered, he didn't know, but their vengeance would be terrible), when these creatures that he finally managed to tell me about, and others that he never did, when all these creatures had so paralyzed him and for so long that his face was white, empty, painful. . . . My first, and only, son, that is. By my first, and only, marriage. He was a fine child, and clever. The marriage had been equally fine, but rather less clever. Not surprisingly. I had neither of them by the time I reached the office viewing room with Vincent.

That, then, was Katherine Mortenhoe's face before the screen went down. Afterward, there was no more than a series of director's tricks: women watching themselves in

mirrors, women flailing and wailing, women saying fuck. It diverted me (and distanced me) to wonder which had come first, directors watching women's tricks or women watching directors' tricks. Certainly human behavior had changed since the coming of TV behavior. But the symptoms went on and on. . . .

Rigor, paralysis, coordination loss, sweating, double vision, incontinence . . . all with a timetable and a brisk itinerary like a package vacation brochure: in the first week customers all do this, in the second week customers all see that, in the third week customers all feel something else. In the fourth week customers all drop dead. At last Dr. Mason, who had been addressing the opposite wall rather than the living woman in front of him, closed the final glossy page, where there should have been a picture of a lot of brisk happy people waving good-bye at a brisk happy funeral. If the picture was there, he didn't let her see it.

The particularization had seemed to me a needless cruelty, but Katherine Mortenhoe brightly took in every word, nodding, and sometimes asking for clarification. If I hadn't just once seen her real face (Vincent must have been proud of having arranged that), I'd have thought she was enjoying it. I'd have thought that it at last gave her an importance. But the brightness was only another director's trick, though she did it rather well.

Then she stood up, and promised to keep in touch, and formalized the occasion by shaking Dr. Mason's hand, and went. As simply and plainly as that. Maybe the romantic in her demanded a sort of stylized nobility.

I was glad I couldn't follow her, couldn't see her out in the corridor, couldn't go down with her in the elevator. One way and another she had precious little privacy left.

Dr. Mason, who had gone with her to the door, closed it behind her and returned to his desk. Once there he appeared to have nothing to do. People move about so. It was Vincent, of course, who got things going again.

"Can do?" he asked me.

I closed my eyes.

"You always feel like that," he said. Then, "Mason should have made more of the Syndrome thing. How special she was. This special sensitivity. She'd have liked that."

I didn't answer. He pressed the intercom switch.

"Mason? I think you should have made more of the Syn-

drome thing. How special she was. This special sensitivity. She'd have liked that. Don't you think so?"

I heard Dr. Mason squaring papers, presumably the computer printout. "I never want to have to do *that* again," he said.

"But we agreed you should emphasize her special sensitivity. For God's sake, the poor woman needs *something* to cheer her up."

"I kept talking. It was all I could do—just keep talking."

"Not long ago such jobs were a regular part of the doctor's day."

"They aren't anymore."

"No. Well. And I'm not saying I could have done it any better. Anyway, Roddie can always bring out the Messiah bit later on."

I opened my eyes. After three minutes closed the pain was just beginning. "You're very sure she'll sign," I said.

"They always do."

"We all know why."

"Can I help it how the world's made?" He kept it light, imitating his dear old grandfather. "Please, Roddie, do me a favor. No guilts, no great social conscience. You want I should give the lady to some other boy? Some boy who wouldn't treat her right? Some boy without half your style? You want that?"

I played the ball given. "You can't," I said, laconiclike. "I'm the one with the eyes."

Mason was leaving the office. The microphone was on and he'd heard us and he could have come through the connecting door. But he'd preferred to keep his side of the mirror, and now he was leaving. Suddenly it infuriated me that he should try to keep himself apart.

"Hey," I shouted. "If you think your bit stank, then how about mine?" Pinning myself out so that anything he said or did was bound to hurt. If he went out without answering, that too would hurt.

He turned, his hand on the doorknob. "I think you'll help her," he said. "With any luck, so shall I. We can only do our best."

He managed not to sound priggish, and I may have blushed. Anyway, he was talking to a mirror.

"I must go now. I have other patients."

He smiled at where he thought I was, and went.

He was a nice man, and the room was empty without him. The nice room where nice doctors told nice patients nasty things. Vincent got up, stretched, wandered around behind me, did his best to fill in. I never want to give the impression that Vincent was—is—insensitive. But his considerable sensitivity, both artistic and personal, was entirely media-orientated. Mine I was still working at.

"It's too soon after the operation," he said. "You're still unsettled. We should have waited."

"You don't choose your terminals. They just come along. I'm grateful for the opportunity." I meant it. "I can't think of a better chance to prove it's all been worth it."

"We have faith in you, Roddie. Of course you know that." He scrunched my shoulder with his large thick fingers. "The man with the TV eyes—it feels good, huh?"

I hadn't decided how it felt. Instinctively I put my hand up to my head, to the plate under my scalp. The thin seams were just detectable beneath my hair.

"It's a great responsibility," I said.

He waved that away for the formality it was. "And the sleep?" he said. "It would drive me mad, you know. Never sleeping."

"You get used to it. I rest a lot. The drugs help. I'm never tired." That was a lie. I was permanently tired. "They say if anything gets me it'll be the lack of dreams."

"You should sleep with your eyes open. I hear sentries do it all the time."

If he was going to teach ~~me~~ I refused to go on being brave. "It's not quite the same," I said.

He slapped me playfully. I was a member of his team. Either I gave him reassurance or he couldn't afford to know.

"I'll buy you a drink, Roddie. The staff here have a bar down in the basement somewhere."

Mostly it felt marvelous. I was, after all, a reporter. I had suffered under the exigencies of camera and lighting crews all my professional life. The presence of a camera takes people in different ways—some people are good and some are bad, the best are careful and the worst are carefully uncareful. Scientists claim that the very act of observation alters in some subtle way the nature of the phenomenon being observed. When the phenomenon is people and the observer is the grasping lens of a camera the ways aren't all that subtle. To be free of all that was marvelous.

Also it felt important. I was important. I had been thought important enough for a fifteen-thousand-pound investment of company money. And a whole lot of insurance. With a three-year contract that would keep me in luxury the rest of my life. And a guaranteed renewal if I wanted it. Which I would.

I was, after all, a reporter. Like Reuter, with his carrier pigeons. I was presented with the most staggering tool for truthful reportage the world had ever known. Of course I would renew. The price was high, but so were the satisfactions. Three years would see me just beginning. Not in terms of fame, for that would follow instantly on the first press release, but in terms of technique. In terms of (though I was shy of the word), in terms of artistry. The death of Katherine Mortenhoe, no matter how challenging, was only a start.

Then again, it felt outrageous. I was a surgical monstrosity. A cyborg. I had been violated. I had offered myself willingly for obscene experimentation. I had given up my self, given up a right even to the ultimate privacy of my senses. I was a public man. What I saw, every voyeuristic hack by the receiving monitor would see. My tapes could be played back for the cheap delectation of office boys. My finest moments were common property. And those less fine. If I glanced down at my pecker while I pissed, that image too could be taken down and used in evidence against me. "The man was patently a libertine, m'lud. He squeezed his pecker sensuously while he pissed. . . ." And if I closed my eyes or stayed in complete darkness for any length of time, the implanted retinal microcircuits would overload, and pain would force my consciousness into light again.

That then was the price, and that the satisfaction. I was public property, and utterly alone. (For who could trust me with secrets, either of body or mind?) And I had within my head the possibility of greatness.

Vincent brought me a beer, and a tomato juice for himself. He was going on, he said. I didn't need to ask where.

She nearly told the woman beside her on the travelator. "I've only got four weeks to live," she nearly said. The woman on the travelator would have replied, "Now that's a funny thing, 'cause so have I." And with so much in common, they'd have struck up a conversation.

But the woman on the travelator was watching the advertisements, and Katherine didn't care to interrupt her. So her secret went unshared all the way back to Computabook. Or Peregrine Publications, as they presented themselves to the public. (In promotional circles computers were a dirty word.)

Peter was waiting for her. In one of his tizzies.

"There's been a flap on. Babs suddenly rang up spare capacity, love, so I had to send *Queen's Mate* on down. I hope you don't mind."

"I don't think I know a book called *Queen's Mate*."

"Of course you do. It was one of Barbara's early tries at the Wentworth. You circled it so I knew it couldn't be too bad."

She sat down at once at the teleprinter. "My dear boy, I'd circled it as a particularly crass example of what's getting past the banality scanners these days." Her fingers twitched, ready to start typing a rerun. "How long's it been going?"

"Soon after you left. I'd say an hour at least."

She forgot what she was supposed to be doing, and put her fingers away. "I don't expect it matters," she said.

Peter stared at her. He discarded his tizzy, pulled up a chair, sat down beside her.

"You're my best, my dearest Katie-Mo." He put a comforting hand on her arm. "And I'm a selfish pig. I should have asked you first of all what happened at the hospital."

"It wasn't a hospital."

"The Medical Center, then. The place you've just been."

He was kind, and handsome, and a bit silly, and he loved her very much in his homosexual way, and it would have been so pleasant to tell him, to have another little cry, this time into his hanky, and then to go home early to her own dear Harry. Except that she couldn't. A Celia Wentworth heroine would think things weren't really real if they weren't talked about.

"Happened, Peter? What do you think happened? I talked, and the doctor said ho and hum, and I came away. He thinks I'm a foolish old woman."

"Then why are you so upset?"

She didn't deny it. "I . . . don't like being thought a foolish old woman."

"Pull the other one."

"I mean it."

"The other one's got bells on."

She looked into his face, very close. He cared, and she couldn't bear it. "I wonder why your sort likes to paw older women," she said.

He still didn't move. "Probably because we're still a bit like children." He gave her arm a final squeeze, then got up. "But with a bit more tact."

He went softly to the door.

"If you were to take some time off, Katie-Mo, I promise I wouldn't let Babs do anything too terrible. I'm not really a very crass person."

For as long as he was there by the door she could only think how remarkably uncrass a person he was, and wish that she could find the words to say so. But as soon as he was gone she forgot him completely.

She must be practical. She had only four weeks. She must resign at once from Peregrine. She had four weeks into which to pack the next fifty years of living. She must check the banality scanners in Barbara's titling phase. Probably a whole-book scanning operation would be necessary. Fifty years of needs and satisfactions, of love and attainment, of power and sex. Fifty years of love—put that way it sounded ridiculous. And there was dignity. She must tell Harry. With only four weeks, perhaps dignity was all that mattered. Or didn't matter at all. And she must tell Harry. Also her book. She must tell her book, her immortality. But first of all she must resign from Peregrine. And tell Harry. And put to bed at least one more Pargeter and Paladine and Wentworth. And tell Harry. And tell Harry.

She buzzed Peter on the intercom. He answered at once.

"Katie-Mo?"

"*Queen's Mate* cover picture?"

"Barbara suggested the house in long-shot. From page seventy. Crown in foreground, lying on the grass."

"Simple composite?"

"Both in stock, according to info, and not too recent. But I've rung down color changes, just in case."

"I'll see a proof?"

"Natch."

"Good. . . . Keep you off sunsets and oil refineries and you're a doll. Not crass at all."

She flicked the switch before he could answer. A doll?

The only times she'd heard the word used like that was from her first, her American, stepmother. She was a rag-bag of styles, none of them her own. The American stepmother had wanted to please. The successor, bringing a family of her own, had believed in children finding their own level. When her father had moved on, a new career, a new life, Katherine had stuck to that family briefly, like a burr. But her new father, unrecognizable in his new career and his new life, had asked for her and for the continuity he then couldn't allow her to represent. So another style was added. Schools, universities, jobs, bosses . . . and now she was forty-four.

For a moment, after she flicked the switch on the intercom, the screen lifted. She saw past it, to death. She saw herself dead. She saw the chemistry, the bundle of neurones, changed. But the concept was suddenly meaningless. Dead was dead. Utter. Incomprehensible. Dead was nowhere. Dead wasn't coffins, mourners, crematories. Dead was an intolerable nowhere. Dead was the place, the no-place, she'd be at.

She must tell Harry. She reached for the phone, dialed the flat, and listened to the ringing that wouldn't be answered because Harry didn't get back from work till three. The bell rang and rang, and Harry wouldn't answer it because he didn't get back from the office till three. She imagined the empty flat, and the telephone ringing in it. The idea was comforting, and she left it ringing while she started drafting her official letter of resignation. Then she tore up the draft and cut the ringing, and decided she'd resign from nothing. And she'd tell nobody, not until—in Dr. Mason's words—not until her coordination fell below that level necessary for full manual dexterity.

She looked at her hands. They were incredible. She bent her fingers, watching the creases at the joints. She folded her thumbs across her palms in the way monkeys couldn't. She tried to guess what it would be like to lack full manual dexterity.

Later she called Peter, and said she was going out for lunch.

In the cafeteria she found herself making room for her tray on a table next to a man she vaguely recognized. They had done a course together on Randomization within a Multiple Choice Framework, and then he had gone on to spe-

cialize in Randomized Tonality. She'd seen his name on cassette sleeves, and later in connection with kinetics and some Compleat Man theory, and then for a long time nothing.

"I know your face," he said.

"Are you trying to pick me up?" She got rid of the tray. "Or something?"

"No, honestly—and anyway, why shouldn't I?"

She considered why he shouldn't. "I have a husband," she said. Paused. "And four children."

"That's some stability."

She bent her head over her plate. "I don't like to joke about it. My family is very precious to me."

"Of course. I didn't mean . . . You don't look old enough to have four children."

"I'm thirty-eight."

"There you are, then. Are you sure I don't know your face?"

"Jonathan—he's my oldest—he'll soon be seventeen. We're buying him a room in town."

"That's nice."

"You have to plan. My husband's in the trade." Chewing. "You have any family?"

"One." He shifted his position. "I don't see her that much."

"I only asked because my husband's in the trade. He could've kept an eye open."

"Work here, do you?"

"Mmm?"

"I said, do you work here?"

"With four children?"

"Some women do."

"I'm the old-fashioned type. We've got half a house. My husband being in the trade."

They ate. She watched her motherly, capable hands as they pushed the knife and fork.

"How did you fiddle four kids?" he said. "Or do you pay the tax?"

"We pay the tax." She smiled at him. "And you, do you work here?"

He mumbled a bit. "Crime," he said. "I'm in the crime division."

"You know, I think it's wonderful how with these new computers you can just sit back, let them do all the work."

"What did you say your name was?"

"Blount. Mrs. Harry Blount."

"I'm John Peel."

"Tantivy," she said.

They laughed and shook hands across the plates.

"That's good," he said.

"I majored in Folk Lore."

"The girl I thought you were was in Computers. And wrote a bit."

"Not me. I majored in Folk Lore." She could see she intrigued him.

"If you're not with Peregrine, how come you're here?"

She leaned toward him conspiratorially. "I sneak in when I'm up in town. I like to see all the famous people."

"You must be joking."

"The folk heroes of tomorrow."

"I was forgetting."

"Forgetting what?"

"You majored in Folk Lore."

He finished his food and looked at his watch. He wound it, banged his wrist on the edge of the table, then referred to the clock on the cafeteria wall.

"Damn thing," he said. "Look, when are you next in town?"

"Most Wednesdays."

"But today's Tuesday."

"Most Tuesdays, then."

"I just thought we might."

"Might what?"

He stood up. "I'll look out for you."

"Don't depend on it. The children might come down with flu."

"What?" The room was noisy.

"The children might want to go to the zoo."

He stared at her. "I'll look out for you," he said, not smiling, and went away between the crowded tables.

John Peel was sad somehow, but nice. She wondered why she'd never seen John Peel in the cafeteria before. All those Tuesdays in the cafeteria.

She allowed herself a quarter of an hour more, and then went back to her office. Peter wasn't there, but the cover proof for *Queen's Mate* lay on her desk. She saw at once that the reds needed darkening. This color sense she had—

it wasn't something you could learn, either you had it or you didn't. Peter didn't. She looked up the color codes, typed a short message onto the teleprinter, and somewhere in the subbasement a relay shifted. She knew it shifted, actually physically shifted, because she'd done a three-week familiarization course down there during her first year. She checked Barbara's progress show: the covers would go into a first printing in under three hours. She wouldn't be there—she was going home on time for once—but Barbara wouldn't need a second telling.

She was going home on time for once. It was a sudden decision. And she had just time to set up the new Paladine. Aimee's doctors were sympathetic. PALADINE, she typed. DOCTOR GROUPING. RANDOMIZE. The printout came back at her fast, and she sorted sequences. Harry at three-thirty was a leisure man, down in the Hobby Room, doing what he could. Recently he'd talked to her deviously of moving—no doubt the men in their new block were a pushy lot, achievement-orientated. And Harry had ten thumbs. 7—5—3, she typed. 10—7—1—1—4—3—6. *Men never grow up,* she thought. And then remembered the different, frailer vanities of women. Barbara scanned for familiarity, and returned a sequence four points similar, over a date two years old. Four points were too many, even after an interval of two years. She considered substitutions.

Harry would be down in the Hobby Room when she got home, and wouldn't expect to see her till six. She never worked the statutory minimum: even with the production schedule filled there were always jobs around the office she could find to save her going back to the empty flat or to some Leisure Fulfillment Course. So she could go home on time for once, and still not have to see him, not have to tell him, until six.

There was always the possibility of not going home at all.

She looked up the telephone services card, found *Dial-A-Church,* and rang the number. They were a long time answering.

"Vicar Pemberton speaking."

So then it was too late for her to change her mind. "I'm going to die," she said.

"You wouldn't have rung me if you really believed that. What have you taken?"

"I've taken umbrage."

"Believe me, my dear, today's anguish is no more than tomorrow's fading memory. Only death is lasting. Tell me what you've taken."

"I've not taken anything."

"Your ringing tells us both that you do not really want to die. Where are—"

"I don't want to die."

"We all die, my dear, but in God's time, not our own. It's impertinent, I think, to take upon ourselves that particular choice. Almost as if . . . tell me where you're calling from."

"I don't want to die."

"I can always ring off, you know. Get the exchange to trace the call. We have a lot of experience in this sort of—"

"You can't," she said. "You'll get the building, not the extension number."

"You're in a building, then. Office block? Residential block?"

She wondered what she was doing, ringing this poor man. Perhaps he needed worries not his own. There were things she could tell him.

"If you don't answer, caller, I shall have to ring off. I beg you to—"

"Father, I have sinned." Wasn't that what one said?

"Sin is a harsh word, my dear. You have failed, as we all have failed. The Lord Jesus, born of woman, understands the agony of our failure."

Katherine wondered what the hell that had to do with the price of tea in China. And what either of them was talking about.

"Is that why," she said, "you sit on the end of a telephone, and your churches are deserted?"

"It's easy to see you haven't been near one in a long time, my dear. Our churches are far from deserted."

"Filled with derelicts, then. Bunks for derelicts."

"You answer your own question."

She frowned. If he was going to play at being enigmatic, she was wasting her time. She *was* wasting her time. She was wasting *her* time. And he would call her "my dear."

"Christianity is dead, Vicar. As I shall be in another four weeks."

Which was what she discovered she'd called to tell him. So she rang off.

Barbara was still showing her a sequence four points simi-

lar, over a date two years old. Some of Aimee Paladine's readers would have ridiculously long memories. Katherine chewed her ball-point, considering substitutions.

She was home by three-forty. Told that she was leaving, Peter had asked nothing and made only the lightest, unconcerned comment. He pressed his face sideways against the window glass after she had gone, trying to see her on the pavement far below. But the tiny trotting blobs were indistinguishable. He kicked the cold radiator under the window till it rang.

Traveling in the rush hour for the first time in years, she was appalled, and fought furiously not to become just another casualty statistic. Promised four weeks, she was determined to keep them to their promise; him to his promise; Him to His promise.

The flat wasn't empty. As soon as she opened the door it gave her back a human presence, an indefinable displacement of the air somewhere. Harry. She wasn't ready for him, and she closed the door again and went back toward the elevator. But if not the flat, where? And if not Harry, who? When she opened the door a second time he was waiting for her in the lobby.

"I thought I heard you," he said.

"I thought I'd left something in the elevator."

"I've done that. Once I chased it down five floors."

He stood blocking the doorway. He laughed, but something had happened. It was as if she were a stranger.

"Well?" she said.

"There wasn't anything. It was all my imagination."

"So do I get to come in?"

Making it a joke like that he couldn't refuse. She walked past him into the kitchen and started putting away the food she had bought on the way home. The kitchen was tinier than she remembered. The whole flat was tinier. Between them they earned seven thousand: surely they could afford something better than this? She banged the door of the refrigerator.

"I'm glad you remembered dinner," Harry said. "I was going to, but then I didn't."

He came up behind her where she stood at the window, fiddled with his cuffs, and then suddenly put his arms around her, making her jump.

"I don't know how to say this to you, Kate." He gave her a reassuring little squeeze. "You see, I know."

There were blocks opposite, and blocks beyond, and people home from work in every one of them. From where she stood she could see easily seven hundred homes, sheltering seven hundred families. In not one single one of them was the husband holding the wife and saying that.

"You can't know." She had a vivid picture of her own home from the homes opposite: five windows, a balcony, modular. She knew it was her own home because of the curtains.

Harry said, "I didn't want you coming in, pretending nothing had happened."

"But you can't know."

"I want to look after you, Kate. I know I haven't, but I want to now."

She leaned back against him, soothed. "How can you know?"

"I thought we could go away together. He said he didn't mind that. Somewhere easier. Friendlier. We could have all the fun of choosing. He said it was a good idea."

He took one arm away, fumbled in his pocket, and produced a fan of travel brochures which he held in front of her like a bad conjuror. She was supposed to choose one.

"Who's *he?*" she said.

"Vincent."

"Vincent?"

"He insisted I was to call him that. He's a program controller with NTV."

She smiled at the blocks opposite. It was just like Harry to get things not quite right. If anybody had told him, it would be someone from the Medical Center. They should have asked her first, of course, or at least told her what they were going to do. But now the whole thing was out of her hands, and she was relieved. She was—

"No!" She beat at Harry's hands, wrenching herself away. The travel brochures slipped, hot and shiny, down onto the floor.

"No, Harry. No!" She swung round on him. "No!" she screamed in his face.

She had made the connection. NTV ran the Human Destiny shows. And Vincent Ferriman. NTV ran Vincent Ferriman ran the Human Destiny shows. She'd never watched

them, but she knew what they did. Peter talked about them, he watched them, he accepted the rationale, the simple social duty, he'd accept anything, and she knew what they *did*. What they did to people.

"No, Harry. They can't."

He stepped back. "Of course they can't."

"Not to me."

"Of course not to you. Not if you don't want them to."

The tone of his voice stopped her, his instant acquiescence. And the way he met her gaze in wide-eyed guilt. She tested him.

"Of course, they'd pay a lot of money," she said.

"What use is money?"

"And the programs do a lot of good."

"Rubbish. They pander to the worst in people."

"And I'm sure they'll be very tactful about the filming."

"The idea's disgusting."

She moved carefully away, not touching him. "So what did you tell this . . . Vincent?"

"I told him no. I told him to get stuffed. I told him even if you agreed he'd never get my signature on his disgusting piece of paper. I told him to get stuffed."

She was trembling violently. She let him sit her down at the kitchen table and fetch her whiskey, but she couldn't hold the glass. So he held it for her, and mopped her chin when she spluttered. She hated whiskey—they only had it for Harry. And the spring sunlight was so brilliant on the corner of the table that it made her want to cry. *If only he hadn't been so vehement,* she thought. *So positive, so definite, so vehement. If only Harry hadn't been so vehement I might have believed him. Then we could have told the whole bloody lot of them to get bloody stuffed.*

TWO *Wednesday*

I spent most of the next day watching clips from previous Human Destiny Shows. So far Vincent had not been able to obtain authorities either from Katherine Mortenhoe or her husband, but he was confident that these could soon be fixed up. "Fixed up" was a phrase I didn't care to think about too closely. Anyway, I was in no particular hurry to start in on poor Mrs. Mortenhoe: not having worked on any of the earlier programs, there was a lot, more than simply in terms of technique, for me to learn about them. You don't come in on a series run of a high-rating show without first getting under the skin of the format. There's an atmosphere, a style . . . it's like a fashionable new suit: wearing it alters in a hundred subtle ways how you behave, and takes a bit of getting used to. Any new ideas I might have—and I hoped there'd be plenty—had to be thought into the right shape. So Vincent gave me a technician, and a stack of tapes, and the run of an NTV viewing room.

Not the directors' viewing room, which was being used by some gigantic Icelandic genius who nearly flattened me on the one occasion we met (I was coming out of the gents), but the tiny VIP's viewing room on the same floor. I was grateful to the leave-it-to-the-last-minute Icelander: NTV surely knew how to treat its Very Important People. For a start, the decor was Presidential Baroque, and probably bulletproof. The seats, eight of them, grouped informally, were white true-sheepskin, and fully servo-adjustable. And beside it stood a charming red plastic console offering individual Autosec facilities, an instantaneous translation service in the four World languages, memory-linked jotters, an intercontinental telephone, lines to the Information Center and the Personnel Data Bank, customized air-conditioning and dispensers for various beverages, hot and cold, sweet

and sour, hard and soft. All that was lacking, maybe, was a silent vibro unit to take the labor out of jacking off in the bluer movies.

Mostly I stood at the back, unawed, making my notes on a couple of old envelopes.

It is hard for me now, when remembering that ten-hour session, not to color my recollections with understanding that came later. But if I'm to explain, let alone excuse, my behavior at that time, it's absolutely vital that I do my best. You see, I'd caught very few of the original Human Destiny transmissions: I worked odd hours and, anyway, unlike some professionals, I'd never dedicated my every waking moment to the medium. I reckoned there were other ways of approaching the world than through a twenty-seven-inch oblong. So most of the material was new to me. And, packed into ten hours' concentrated viewing, it was a staggering experience.

I should make it clear that not all the series were about terminals, not all of them ended in a clear death. There was, for example, a haunting case of progressive and incurable insanity. There were six cathartic shows analyzing the social rehabilitation of a totally limbless accident victim. There was even one sequence that ended in the surprise recovery of a woman whose compulsory abortion had been strongly opposed on psychiatric grounds. The camera hung around, waiting for her promised breakdown, but it never came. The director used the hoary old miracles-of-modern-science angle instead. It was strangely moving.

Different as they were, therefore, the programs all had one thing in common: they all aimed at total truthfulness about the human condition.

Each was an open-ended half hour series, often—especially toward the ends of the terminal subjects—screened daily, and probing frankly and honestly into the mental and physical states both of the prime sufferers and of those family or nursing staff who accompanied them on their anguished journeys. They were sagas of human endurance, of the human spirit in extremis. Every one of them was a memorable viewing experience. I do not mean to suggest that in all the programs everyone was noble and everyone was brave: there was selfishness and degradation, cowardice, the petty jealousy of neighbors for the camera's attention, the eager family grubbing for bequests, also the hatred of nurses work-

ing long unprofitable hours for demanding, stupid, hopeless, unworthy people. But these were real reactions, truthful reactions, human reactions. They struck home. They were without artifice, the ordinary reactions of ordinary people. They could not fail to remind each individual viewer of his or her own personal potential for good or bad, for the courageous or the shabby. They presented a clear choice—and with the choice the outcome, in terms of misery or joy. The effect on me of these programs, pounding in one after the other, was shattering.

Detractors of this level of truthful reportage always claimed that constant exposure to the spectacle of suffering dulled the sensibilities. The point about the suffering in the Human Destiny shows was that it was progressive. It could continue to excite horror and compassion because there was always a new agony in store. And, because there was time for study in depth, the participants could be shown as individuals, not merely as newsreel symbols—the burning soldier, the starving baby, the headless bomb victim. They were real people, with real mothers-in-law, and real dinners burning on the stove unheeded. It was details like this that kept the show alive, kept alive its capacity to involve.

Even now I can still remember that burning dinner, observed by the cool eye of the camera, cut back to, while the man lay on the sitting room floor in a seizure, urine staining the crylon carpet, a chair broken, the brother swearing cunt and bugger at the telephone, the wife (who could have been taking the children away, could have been turning down the gas) pushing at her husband with one red leather toe to see if this time he was really dead. And the full-face close-up when she found that he was not, and knew that the whole charade would be gone through again.

These were the moments a reporter might wait a lifetime to capture. These were the moments the Human Destiny show came up with time and time again.

And the ratings showed that NTV was right in judging the public's deep unconscious need. Its life was false, prettified into a bland, painless, deathless advertiser's dream. The public wanted, and deserved, to be reminded that this was only a half of life, the half allowed by technology run wild.

For me there would be logistic problems, of course. Being my own camera was an inestimable advantage in terms of spontaneity, but it limited the angles. It meant that I

would have, in some measure, to compose the scene in advance, and cut and direct it as I went along. Vincent would naturally reshape my material, but if I didn't happen to be looking in the right direction at the right moment, then the moment was lost. And I'd be on my own, with no helpful floor manager to nudge my arm. It was just the challenge I'd been looking for. I'd do Katherine Mortenhoe proud.

I came out of the viewing room in a state of intimate communion with all mankind. The people I saw in the corridor, the same old TV people, were invested with a new immediacy. I was painfully aware of the bones beneath their flesh, of the heroism that might at any moment be expected of them. I couldn't imagine how they could possibly go about their lives so unprepared. When one of them slapped me on the shoulder I could have wept for his fleeting vigor.

"Roddie . . . where you been?"

"Out of town." The surgery was still a well-kept secret.

"Lucky fella. Thought I hadn't seen you."

"Vincent gave me some time off. For good behavior."

"And now you're back in it." He leaned closer, deodorized out of his mind. "I hear there's a new terminal. And they say you're getting her."

"Do they?"

"Wise man. But you can't go around with Vincent long these days without someone putting two and two together. He's the king of the terminals. Or didn't you know?"

"He does other things."

"She's all over the building, I tell you. Given three weeks. Some 36-26-36 number, working in an abortion clinic. Given three weeks. Absolute godsend."

"You don't happen to know her name as well, do you?"

"Matter of fact I do. Katie Mortenhoe. Not an easy one to forget. Absolute godsend. They say the series was on the skids, couldn't find as much as a spastic. Vincent must be busting his Y-fronts over this one."

"He seemed cheerful enough this morning."

"That's how you do it, Roddie. Hear all, see all, say nowt. But I've never known a buzz as loud as this be wrong. You're getting our little Miss Mortenhoe, believe you me."

I watched him bulldoze his way on down the corridor and around the corner out of sight. His little Miss Mortenhoe was five-foot-nine, twice married,forty-four, with a face like a female politician and a figure she didn't think much of, so

that nobody else thought very much of it either. I knew also that she was capable, far more than he was, of suffering. Capable of. Capable of far more.

The state of communion withered. The bones beneath people's faces were just as true, and the heroism just as possible, but the people themselves were remote, totally alien. They were TV people. And Vincent had leaked the name Katie Mortenhoe so precisely that it was already all around the building, and would be all around the city by morning.

I left. I wondered whom I was trying to kid that the people there were remote and alien. Remote from me? Alien to the man with the TV eyes? I took a taxi, thinking *luxury for the rest of my life,* and fought the inverse snobbery in me that despised it. Katherine Mortenhoe was the romantic, not I. Sitting comfortably in the back of the taxi I suddenly remembered something, and laughed. "Hear all, see all, say nowt," the man had said, staring, as if with a dirty story, into my eyes. If he'd known whose eyes he was really staring into, Vincent's eyes, NTV's eyes, he'd have shit a brick.

I seem to remember I went to a cinema that night. Or it might have been a casino. The cinemas blur in my mind, and so do the casinos. The one safe thing to say is that I didn't go home. If you didn't sleep in it, what else was a home for?

Katherine had woken early that morning. Her sleep had been by courtesy of Dr. Mason, and she felt her waking to be his doing also. One morning she would not wake, and would not sleep either. He had measured out her life for her, four weeks, twenty-eight days, give or take a day. He had hardly been generous. Presumably twenty-seven days now, give or take a day.

She felt panic at the hours' passing. She sat up, pushed the bedclothes hurriedly back.

For what?

She pulled them up again and lay down and stared at the early spring sunlight on the ceiling. Was the sun going to shine for her every day? She remembered a summer holiday, a children's playground, paddle boats, a tiny village for guinea pigs, swings for her dolls, sunshine . . . and the helicopter pad beside it all with regular departure flights back to the city. She'd been six, or maybe seven, with a new mommy. After the first week she had refused to go to the

playground, although it was the best place. Her father had thought her such a funny, brooding child, not to be able to bear the whir of her regular departing hours.

It had been possible then, simple even, to deal with the difficulty. She played in another part of town.

Harry had suggested this, suggested that they went away, suggested that they played in another part of town. But there was nowhere far enough. She said yes and no to him, and listened to his plans. But she knew that she would go on working at Computabook for as long as she could, and then —in self-defense, if not for Harry's sake—she would kill herself. Organisms wore out, broke down, stopped. There was nothing to make a song and dance about.

Harry slept on. She turned over in the bed and closed her eyes: it wasn't a bonus that the sunlight was inexpressibly beautiful, it was a sentimental, unhelpful delusion. Beauty was one of the human mind's most straightforward pleasure mechanisms. Beauty that broke your heart was sick. She got up soon after and made breakfast, quelling the shake in her hands that was new from yesterday.

Recurrent rigor, Dr. Mason had said, but she quelled it firmly all the same. And took no capsules for the tightness, not exactly a headache, around her scalp. Her pulse rate was normal, and her morning visit to the lavatory not particularly traumatic. Progress would be slow at first. Above all, there was no longer any need for her to worry. Four years of listening and watching and wondering were over, and the realization made her curiously lighthearted. If there was one thing she hated, it was people who thought and talked of nothing but their health.

Then Harry came into the kitchen with a careful, graveyard face.

"You couldn't sleep," he said.

"On the contrary, I slept excellently."

It was only to Harry that she used phrases like "on the contrary." Harry, and difficult people on the telephone.

"Nothing seems to keep me awake," he said guiltily.

"I told you, I slept like a log."

"And now I've let you get the breakfast."

"Oh, for God's sake."

He sighed, tiptoed meekly to the table, and sat down. She stood over him.

"What's the matter? Has somebody died?"

He burst into tears. There were some things she didn't have to put up with.

"Coffee's in the pot," she told him, grabbed her handbag, and went out.

Left alone, Harry cried for a long time. Then he looked at his face in the bathroom mirror, rang the Licensing Bureau and told their answering service he wouldn't be in that day because his wife was sick. The travel agent's booklets for which he had made a detour on his way home the previous evening after Vincent had broken the news (so sympathetically) to him were lying on the table by the telephone. He picked them up and tore them systematically into little colored squares which he threw away down the garbage chute. Back in the kitchen again, he started to cry.

Katherine was even earlier on the streets than usual. It was so quiet she could hear her own footsteps. Her high spirits returned. A giant vacuum truck came along the slip road on its way back to the depot, and she thought how tidy it would be simply to lie down in front of it (when the driver wasn't looking) and disappear into the works forever. You'd meet the oddest people. . . .

Without thinking, she started as usual up the ramp of the street walkover. Below her the carriageways were clear as far as she could see in either direction, so she ran back down the ramp and, for the thrill of it, climbed the drag barrier, and crossed by the road itself. She paused on the center reservation: from where she stood the familiar blocks were strange and exciting, the sun extra bright on sands that human feet had never trod. A solitary truck whined in the distance and she clung to the center drag barrier, laughing as it blurred past her, unimaginably noisy, doppler-effecting itself away into a new distance, indistinguishable from the old. She caught an instantaneous glimpse of the driver's mad face, staring at her as if *she* were the one who was mad. Then he was gone, his apocalyptic moment traveling with him down the road. She climbed the barrier and crossed the remaining carriageways on her toes, like a cat.

She was still so early that she decided she'd walk all the way to Computabook. The exercise would do her good. And nobody got mugged at five in the morning: the muggers and rapists were safely at home by then, counting their boodle or writing up their doings for the papers. But she stopped off

at the neighborhood Post Office first, to see if there was any mail. There were three in the box, two for Harry and one for her.

Hers had the discreet NTV symbol on the back flap.

She replaced Harry's two carefully for him to pick up later on his way to work, and stuffed her own conclusively into a slot marked Overseas Mail Only. She didn't want it. She didn't want anything to do with it. Then she spent the next half hour getting it back, persuading the man at the sorting office counter three floors down that she'd posted it by mistake. He asked her for proof of identity, examined her driving license, her Computabook pass, her blood-group sticker, her travelator season ticket, her pedestrian's permit, her Social Security card, currency card, diners' card, voter's card, civil offenses card (unmarked), and post box registration certificate, and then said he would have to ask his superior who didn't get in till nine. So she screamed at him, and waved her arms about, and called him coarse names till he handed over the letter because he didn't like to see a lady get upset.

She took her letter upstairs, and out into the sun. The letter looked less dangerous there, less likely to go off. The pavements were filling up. She experienced the rigor again, and sat down in a little grass park with gravestones and daffodils, the letter on her lap, while she willed the rigor to go away. Then she opened the letter.

My dear Katherine,

I begin like that because I feel, after my long talk with your husband earlier this afternoon, that we are already old friends. Or perhaps old enemies would be more appropriate, for I gather from Harry that you and I are unlikely to see eye to eye on a number of points.

Undoubtedly he has told you of my proposal, and I can guess that your initial reaction—as with most people—has been one of distaste and even total rejection. It is my experience, however, that such reactions are the result of an incomplete understanding of the issues involved.

It would be impossible for me to present a rationale of my position within the span of this short letter. I can only assure you that others have found me a not insensitive person, and that I approach you at all only out of a sincere belief in the profound human value of

what you and I together can create. It is possible even that you may find my experience helpful in your present trouble.

On a purely practical level, for example, our organization would be able to provide you with complete protection from the unscrupulous commercial pressures you are certain to be subjected to during the coming weeks. It would be mealymouthed of me not also to mention here the considerable financial advantages to your family should you agree to even a limited participation.

The law, of course, protects your right to privacy as a citizen: we at NTV go further, having a lively respect for your privacy as a unique human individual. I am available at any time to answer your questions, and —even if there is no possibility of a central ground on which we as intelligent people may meet—I still look forward to talking to you at the earliest possible opportunity.

Yours sincerely,
Vincent Ferriman.

She had hoped for a grasping, gushing letter that she could immediately hate. All that was left now was for her to resent Vincent Ferriman for his discreet professionalism. Not that, even so, she considered his letter worth answering: there was nothing that he and she—no matter how mutually intelligent they were—could possibly have to say to each other. If she had to die (which at that moment seemed incredible, even the gravestones among the daffodils confirming the fact that it was other people who died, not she) she would die in private. Dying was the one human activity still able to receive that privilege.

She was not afraid of Vincent Ferriman's rationale, his reasons, for she knew she was beyond them. If she met him or spoke to him, it would be her body that rebelled, not her mind. And her body would make her throw up on his feet.

She refolded his letter and put it carefully away in her handbag. Then she sat among the noisy sparrows, her legs neatly together, and fought the grayness his letter had brought. Organisms wore out, broke down, stopped. There was nothing to make a song and dance about. She remembered she had come out without having a proper breakfast, remembered why, and felt ashamed.

Then she understood her grayness. It wasn't caused by Vincent Ferriman's letter—hunger and shame were what were the matter with her, and both were remediable. She was still far too early for Computabook, so she got up and went in search of a café with a public telephone. There she could eat, and make her peace with Harry.

Over on the far side of the park a small man in a gray-green jacket was eating sandwiches. He finished the last and shook the remaining crumbs onto the grass for the birds. Later he got to his feet a little stiffly and went in search of a place that, when he found it, turned out to be a café with a public telephone. He passed it quickly, without looking in the window, and went on to a bookshop a couple of hundred yards down the road where he bought, after long deliberation, a book by Aimee Paladine.

"Harry?"

"Kate? Where are you?"

"Are you all right, Harry?"

"Of course I'm all right."

"I wasn't very nice."

"You couldn't help it."

"Of course I could."

"It's not a very nice situation."

"Harry—I'm sorry."

"What was I supposed to do, though—dance a jig?"

The plastic telephone mount had numbers scrawled on it, and obscene comments. She began to lose interest in Harry.

"If you were Chinese you might."

"If I knew what you wanted, then—"

"They dress up in white and dance through the streets. Or they used to, long ago, in the year of the four blue dragons."

"What are you on about, Kate?"

"Chinese funerals."

"If I only knew what you wanted."

"Harry, it says here, *Have cunt, will grovel.* I think that's sad, don't you?"

"Kate, where are you? I'm coming to fetch you."

"You mustn't."

"I'm coming."

"It'll make you late for work."

"I've told them I'm not going in."

"Why on earth not?" He didn't want to answer, and she pressed him. "Why on earth not?"

"They'll understand, even if you don't."

"I understand perfectly. Perfectly."

"If I only knew what you wanted, Kate."

"I want to be married to someone else, Harry. For the last twenty-seven days of my life I want to be married to someone with courage."

She liked telephones: they gave her the power to end conversations exactly when she wanted to. She rang off and went slowly back to her table and her egg on toast. Hunger and shame were what were the matter with her, and both were remediable. With food she cured her hunger, and with fury she cured her shame.

He was worried about the future, of course, *his* future. A Newly Single for the second time, and two years older than she (had he ever been, like her, young?), and not rich, and with a built-in shabbiness that by now would attract only the bossiest of the has-beens (she was bossy herself, perhaps, but never a has-been), she had to admit that his prospects were hardly rosy. Probably the best he could hope for was a future as stepfather to a trio of maintained minors whose real father preferred penury to the company of them and their distracted mother. It was a common enough situation, and attracted the doormat types. The types that made the fine understanding father figures in a dozen Celia Wentworths. But at least Harry's future was life.

A bossy has-been? Never. John Peel had tried to pick her up, had believed her to be thirty-eight. If she wanted a man she could get one any time at all. She finished her egg on toast. . . . No, she couldn't allow herself that one; that was the petty bureaucrat talking, the sexy, high-life government executive in charge of one thousand paper clips. If she wanted a man (unpaid) she'd really have to work quite hard. And she needed the energy for other things.

Other things?

Her book, for instance.

While the hours departed.

Abruptly she left the café and took the nearest expressway to Computabook. Priorities were what counted, and if she was realistic she had to admit that precious little time remained to her for the writing of her book. The rigors would become more frequent, followed by intermittent paral-

ysis, followed by coordination loss, followed by sweating, double vision, incontinence, hallucination, progressive autonomic breakdown bringing on irregular heartbeat, anoxia, total paralysis, and . . . It was an impressive list, a litany with a rhythm, a poetry, even a certain magnificence of its own. And she knew she needed magnificence. She remembered the Irish poet Yeats had said, for the magnificence, that he would rather be chronic cardio-sclerotic than Lord of Upper Egypt. She tried out his Irish accent in her head, and was cheered. But it did leave very little time for the writing of a novel.

Possibly she could reprogram Barbara, devise new criteria, new cross-associations, new wordstore links. It was a task she could probably perform long after the more usual writing skills had deserted her, long into incontinence, double vision, even muscular spasm. If she hadn't killed herself first.

She worked the whole day on the basic parameters, savagely, channeling her anger, enjoying the reversal of Barbara's most cherished beliefs. Peter came in and out, got on with the running of the department, asked no questions. It was, he thought, pausing in the doorway, looking at her, the least and the most he could do. She'd never tell him her trouble, simply live through it. They'd worked together for a long time, nearly three years. . . . He could find no comfort whatsoever in this new evidence that not only homos were lonely.

He lingered on after three, unwilling to leave her solely to Barbara's mechanical conversation. He tidied his desk, and tidied it again. He doodled approaches to the banality screening program Kate had mentioned the day before. She might be pleased, or she might resent the intrusion. At that moment she was busy with something else, busy with her rage: it hung, unexplained, in the air of her office like a dangerous vapor.

Around four o'clock an outside call came through, and he ran interference. The caller said she was a newspaper reporter. Peter was glad he had run interference.

"Mrs. Mortenhoe isn't here," he said.

"That's strange. . . . I've rung her home, and she isn't there either." The reporter sounded pleased. "Perhaps you could tell me something about Mrs. Mortenhoe's plans."

"Plans?"

The question was inexcusable, probing, but he asked it. He was intrigued.

"Her plans for the next four weeks. How long she intends to stay with Computabook. Where, and with whom, she intends to spend the terminal phases."

Ask a silly question and you get a silly answer. He cut the reporter, saying, "I think you have the wrong number," and left the line open to stop her ringing again.

He stared for a long time at the speaker from which her voice had come. It was a mat yellow plastic box, perforated on all sides with thousands of tiny round holes. It had no right to tell him what he had no right to know. It had no right to tell him what he positively should not know. Finally he got up, and walked on mortal joints across to the door of her office.

"Katie-Mo, there was a call for you." He wanted to see her. "It was a reporter."

"What did he want?"

"It was a woman. I told her you weren't here."

"Bless you. Probably some woman's page looking for a new angle on the romantic novel."

"Something like that."

She looked up from her work. He felt his unforgivable knowledge branded across his forehead.

"Why don't you go home?" she said, smiling, smiling. "It's long past knocking off time."

"I think I will." He was drawn to her, and repelled by her. "If you're sure there's nothing?"

"You know me, Pete. Always the eager beaver."

He nodded, and went. He understood her anger better than she understood it herself. He didn't ask her what she was so busy doing, he didn't ask her anything. One way and another he'd received answers enough.

Katherine waited a couple of minutes, went through to his office to make sure he had gone, then returned to her own office and called Dr. Mason at the Medical Center. When she gave her name she was put through at once.

"Katherine. I'm with a patient. May I call you back?"

"No, you mayn't. I just wanted to tell you I'm suing you for breach of professional confidence."

"Please, Katherine. I can't talk now."

"A letter from NTV and now a call from the newspapers.

What right had you to publish my totally private affairs around the nation?"

"You don't understand."

"No doubt I'll soon be getting my telegram of condolence from the Prime Minister."

"It's not as simple as that."

"It seems to me perfectly simple."

"There are so many people involved, Katherine. Medical orderlies, data processers, neurograph operators. A leak is possible at so many levels."

"The leak came from you, Doctor. I can hear it in your voice."

"You're upset, my dear. Let me call you back."

"I don't need NTV in order to make money for my family. I have you. And if you call me again I shall enter a further suit for molestation."

"That's a good curtain line, Katherine. But—"

She didn't let him spoil it. And enjoyed imagining his discomfort at the other end, the embarrassed shrug he would offer his patient across the desk. and the smile, the professional smile she knew so well, with which he would instantly mend the shattered consultation. He was false, the falsest of them all. She laughed aloud, a nasty sound in the silent office, and then crisply dialed the number at the head of Vincent Ferriman's company notepaper.

"Mrs. Mortenhoe. Katherine. How good of you to call."

"Not good of me at all. I just wanted to know exactly what Dr. Mason has told you about me."

"Dr. Mason? Are you suggesting that your personal physician has—"

"If not him, then who?"

"I'd like to tell you, Mrs. Mortenhoe. But naturally we have to protect our sources of—"

"Dr. Mason has admitted it."

"I'm sure he hasn't. In this sort of case there are so many people involved, Mrs. Mortenhoe. Medical orderlies, data processers, neurograph operators. A leak is possible at so many levels."

"At so many levels."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I seem to have heard that line before, Mr. Ferriman."

"Obviously somebody has been getting at you. If you wish it, Katherine, we at NTV can protect you from—"

"You'll find, dear Vincent, that I am perfectly capable of protecting myself."

And she terminated the conversation. But it was a sour sort of triumph. The words sounded unworthy, even through her consuming anger, like the cheap, across-the-garden-fence raillery they were.

She felt beleaguered, and returned to the comfort of her book, to the dignity with which it would present the bitter truths of human nature. No, the *neutral* truths, the *chemical* truths of human nature. The need to persecute the oddball was one of these truths, a drive evolved a hundred million years ago for the stabilization of an uncertain species. Greed was another, much later, the result of power structures that depended on material possessions. Deceit was another, a sophistication that—

Almost immediately the internal telephone rang: Reception to say there was a man to see her. In fact, there were four men. From the newspapers. Reception was much excited. Katherine said she would see none of them, and would Reception make sure that they were all reminded very forcibly of the Invasions of Privacy Act. Any place beyond the foyer of the Computabook building rated as a Private Area. Reception, more excited than ever, said she would do her best.

Five minutes later a man appeared, without knocking, in Katherine's doorway.

"Mrs. Mortenhoe?"

"I think she's gone home. Her office is next door—sixty-nine-B. Why don't you try in there?"

"I should tell you, Mrs. Mortenhoe, I took a peek at the block directory. I also got this from the Data Bank photo-files."

He passed her the tape printout of a photograph offering a very passable likeness. She shied away from it.

"Those files are for official use only," she said.

"You can't trust anybody these days." He flicked his cigarette lighter and burned the print to a wisp of gray ash that disintegrated slowly in the still, sunny air of the office. "Your word against mine, Mrs. Mortenhoe." He sat down in front of her desk and brought out a pocket tape recorder. "In clear sight of all," he said. "According to the law."

"Except that, being uninvited in a Private Area, your presence here constitutes a clear infringement of the IPA."

"Not uninvited, Mrs. Mortenhoe. Your Press Officer knows all about my visit."

"Did you tell him why you wanted to see me?"

"I don't think he asked me. He probably thought I was interested in the origins of the romantic novel."

At last she had a worthy opponent, a focus for her rage. She smiled at him, and waited. She knew the law.

"Could we stop sparring, please? My name is Mathiesson. *Morning News*." He showed her his press card and the pass he had got from Computabook's Press Officer.

"I have nothing to say to you, Mr. Mathiesson."

"Then you do not deny that the news of your terminal condition came as a terrible shock to you?"

She knew the law. "I have nothing to say to you."

"And you do not deny that your husband is planning a final fling dream holiday for the two of you?"

"I have nothing to say."

"And you do not deny that you have been offered seven hundred thousand pounds for an NTV exclusive?"

As much as that? Was it really as much as that? "I have nothing to say."

"Mrs. Mortenhoe, what does it feel like to know you're dying?"

She knew the law. "I . . . have nothing to say."

"Do you deny that, prior to receiving this tragic news, your husband had been in two minds about your coming renewal?"

"Did he tell you that?" Oh God.

"Your husband is very dear to you, Mrs. Mortenhoe?"

"I don't have to stay here and listen to your questions." And still she knew the law.

"Of course not. You're free to leave any time you want to."

A worthy opponent. She thought of the men downstairs, the men who hadn't had the foresight to get to the Press Officer before he went home. Out on the street she was public property. Harry wouldn't have told the reporter a thing like that. It wasn't even true.

"I wish to make a formal statement of Private Grief," she said.

"You need two witnesses."

"I shall get them."

"There's a girl on Reception. Everyone else has gone home. And you can hardly expect me to oblige."

"I wonder what you hope to gain, Mr. Mathiesson, using these sort of tactics."

"You're talking to me, Mrs. Mortenhoe. And, like every other good newspaperman, I hope to gain the truth."

She let her silence show what she thought of that one. He opened his eyes very wide, as if he agreed with her.

"NTV may have the money, Mrs. Mortenhoe, but are you sure you like their methods? They tell me you can't even take a crap without a camera counting the poops. Sign with us and we'll guarantee you certain privacies, and the presence of never more than one reporter. And for a maximum of fourteen hours in any twenty-four."

"You work long hours."

He shrugged. "You owe it to the public, Mrs. Mortenhoe. They're pain-starved. It's a serious psychic deprivation: you know that as well as I do."

She smiled at him, rang down to reception and asked for a taxi to be sent around to the loading bay at the back of the building. There would be no reporters there—it was a Private Area.

He leaned across her, keeping her finger on the switch. "Mathiesson here," he said. "Better make that two."

She smiled at him again. She was enjoying herself, enjoying her hatred, enjoying how she was going to humiliate him.

"I'm going home now," she said.

"Mind if I tag along?"

"There's no law against it."

"Right. But lay one finger on you and you'll prosecute?"

"Right." She gathered up her handbag and a sheaf of her day's jottings. "My pain is my own affair, Mr. Mathiesson. I do not propose to sell it to you, or to anyone else."

"I can see you've not yet heard from the merchandisers." He picked up his tape recorder and followed her out into the corridor. "They're a persistent lot. Almost as persistent as we are."

They stood together by the elevators.

"You won't get past my front door," she said.

"Squatter's rights, Mrs. Mortenhoe. If the boys see me arrive with you they'll know I have a prior claim."

An elevator arrived and they got in. She pressed for the ground floor, then slipped out of the last nine inches as the doors were closing. There was a caretaker's entrance she could make her own way to, and bugger the waiting taxi.

But Mr. Mathiesson was too quick, and held the elevator on the emergency button.

"Forgotten something, Mrs. Mortenhoe?"

"The ladies. If you've no objection."

"Be my guest."

He went with her back along the corridor, and settled to wait. She crossed the washroom, broke the seals on the fire escape window, and stepped out. Mr. Matheisson was some ten feet away, waving cheerfully out of the corridor fire exit.

"A breath of fresh air, Mrs. Mortenhoe?"

Looking down at the vertiginous pattern of steps below her, she knew she could anyway never have faced them. She and Mr. Mathiesson went down together, standing silently side by side in the elevator, down to the ground floor. With only one ploy left she was no longer enjoying herself.

She gave the waiting taxi driver her address, watched her companion climb into his taxi, then went straight through her own and out the other side. Mr. Mathiesson was waiting for her.

"Conan Doyle," he said. "Circa 1890."

She capitulated. Above all, she would give him no further opportunity for the exercise of his repulsive wit. He could have his squatter's rights, if they were so important to him. She returned to her taxi and sat in it miserably, hugging her knees, as the driver slotted it neatly, complete with succubus, into the passing traffic. He could have his bloody squatter's rights, she thought, if they were so important to him.

Ironically enough it was the city, in the end, that made the fool of Mr. Mathiesson. A turbine truck absentmindedly ran into the back of his taxi at the first thruway intersection, killing him instantly. She made her driver stop, paid him off, and walked back to look at the mess. Mr. Mathiesson's neck was broken, and his face was imprinted with crumbled lozenges of shatterproof glass. The truckdriver, with several teeth missing, was bleeding tidily into a litter bin. Unseen around the back of the truck a small man in a gray-green jacket leaned against a parking meter, finishing the last pages of his Aimee Paladine.

Katherine gathered from onlookers that the taxi driver was in the telephone booth over the road, phoning for the Accident Instant Disposal Service. She returned for one last look at Mr. Mathiesson, and then went quietly away through the crowd. Organisms wore out, broke down, stopped. There was nothing to make a song and dance about.

THREE *Thursday*

She passed the night in a grubby hotel. And woke with her anger gone. The change had begun right back by the crumpled taxi, by poor Mr. Mathiesson whom nobody was ever going to humiliate again. But she had preserved her anger for its comfort, through her long walk across the aimless central precincts, each dedicated to a newer, brighter lie, of the city. She had preserved it for its solutions, for the righteousness it gave her, leaving Harry, incapable of the simplest thing she needed, to the anxious emptiness of the flat and an endlessly ringing doorbell. She had preserved her anger right across the new city and into the gray residue of the old, up the steps of the first hotel in a street like her father's street, and on again up threadbare stairs to a studio room with a toilet annex.

"Miss Wentworth," she had told the landlord. And then, "For just the one night," paying in advance and hoping he wouldn't ask for her civil offenses card. He didn't, but charged for this magnanimity in leers and heavy innuendos.

She savored him for his hairy arms, his nastiness, and would have opened her legs for him there and then (fifty years of love?) if she'd only known how. And then, when she was finally alone, she looked out at the street, her father's street, the first street she remembered, and understood the pathetic reasons why she had chosen it from a thousand others, and cried.

Later that evening she threw away her sheaf of computer jottings and went out of the hotel to find a telephone booth and ring Harry. Ring him for different, clearer reasons. But the number was not available, and she quickly guessed why. She was glad he had had the sense to protect himself. Perhaps he had disconnected the doorbell as well.

She went to bed early, woke once in the night, sweating

and gripped by rigor. She tried her limbs for paralysis, but it wasn't yet ready for her. She didn't take a capsule: she wanted to measure, to know her condition. The rigor lasted thirty-three minutes. After it she slept again, strangely content.

In the morning she left the hotel early, before the landlord was up. She called in at a nearby police station, made a formal statement of Private Grief, and received two plastic stickers, one for her lapel and one for her front door or car. She now had three days' respite.

On the landing outside her flat a reporter was asleep on an inflatable mattress while another sat dozing against the wall. They roused themselves, read the sticker she put on her door, and started wearily packing up. She went in to Harry.

"I'm home," she called, telling herself she was. "Harry love, I'm home."

The flat had a hectic, besieged air. She went through to the bedroom, where Harry was stirring, trying to open his eyes against the early morning glare and undoubtedly (she didn't blame him) a considerable weight of Panidorm. He looked vulnerable and, Barbara prompted her, like a dormouse. Whatever a dormouse was. Hibernatory? She took off her jacket and lay down on the bed beside him.

"I was afraid you weren't coming back," he said.

"I was in a muddle, love. I'm sorry."

"I was afraid you weren't coming back."

He wouldn't hear her, so she could explain. "I was angry with all the wrong things, Harry. People. And it's not people's fault. All this, it's not people's fault."

"And now you've come." He reached over the bedclothes for her hand. "You've come," he said.

There was more of her explanation, but the words died of their own ridiculous weight. She squeezed Harry's hand, and let his sleep reach out and take her.

I think I watched the arrival of the following morning, the second morning after my first sight of the only true Katherine Mortenhoe, I think I watched it from down by the river. It's a fair guess anyway. I was often down there early those days, seeking the mist that gathered under the bridges and around the stiff black skirts of the moored hovercraft, composing pictures in my head of silky water and seabirds, and police launches winking by. All right, so it was corny,

but I had this picture poem in mind. I'd shape up the tapes back at base one day, and sell them to some Arts Show. If you had the Gift, the fourteen-thousand-pound Gift, you might as well make use of it.

Anyway, I was on my way back west to look for some breakfast—if it wasn't from the river it was from somewhere else—when I saw the only true Katherine Mortenhoe cross the road at an intersection ahead of me. I made no effort to catch up with her, of course: if she'd signed with Vincent I'd surely have heard, and besides, I soon caught sight of the orange fluorescent glow from the sticker on her lapel. So I just kept on as I was going, and then paused at the corner to watch her out of sight. She didn't see me. I don't think she'd have seen me if I'd been ten feet tall in a neon suit. She was dancing. Not crudely, just these three little steps and an old-fashioned sashay, all the way down the sidewalk. Out in the street, forty-four, with four weeks to live, and dancing. There were others about, and they watched her just the way I did. Only they probably thought she was mad, or high, while I knew different.

I tell you, it made my day. Working with her wasn't going to be so rough after all. She possessed what I liked to call the possibility of joy. It's rare these days. Perhaps she had needed Dr. well-meaning Mason to bring it out in her, but there it was. The real, the continuous Katherine Mortenhoe possessed the possibility of joy. I rang Vincent from the nearest phone, got him out of bed to tell him what I'd seen.

I'm glad to hear it," he said. "Yesterday her joy was something else again."

"You didn't tell me you'd been in touch."

"Briefly. A hymn of hate. There was nothing to tell."

"You still think she'll sign?"

"With somebody. And we're the first in the field."

"I'd have approached her myself, the mood she's in, only she's got herself a three-day sticker."

"Best thing. Give her time to learn the score. And you stick to instructions. I'm saving the Roderick charm as my final clincher."

We talked of this and that. It was a friendly sort of morning.

"You got good footage of this dancing?" he asked.

"Two minutes. Maybe more."

"Sounds like good run-in stuff. Behind the titles. Upbeat. Kill the critics always shouting morbid."

"They worry you?"

"I thought they might worry you."

"That was two days ago."

"I shan't ask you what brought about the necessary adjustment."

"Put it like that and you'll make me wonder."

He laughed. "You artistic types are all the same. And ring me out of sleeping hours next time you want to spread your bonhomie around. We aren't all blessed with the golden gift of sleeplessness."

Only Vincent could have grasped the nettle so firmly as to get away with it.

"Right," I said, and laughed also. "The dawn patrol for you in the future. Half-hourly reports on Phoebus rising."

But he'd hung up, and my sharp non-joke was wasted. I'd get his answering service if I called him back. I went out into the undimmed, Katherine-Mortenhoe-dancing-down-the-street morning.

Perhaps the spring was really for humans once a matter of externals, of cuckoos and poetic crocuses. Or perhaps it's always been what it is today, an affair in the blood, a chemistry even the largest city cannot arrest, a process that bends one's perceptions till even oneself can be almost beautiful. In March the sun may shine and the air may be balmy, but without April in the blood this lightheartedness never catches fire. The buildings may purr, but the body knows better. It wears its ugly winter, summer, autumn skin and, as in all these seasons, knows no other. Only in spring is the flesh new, and the spirit incorruptible. Which made, I thought on that sweetly sad, sadly sweet, Katherine Mortenhoe morning, the spring the only bearable time for dying.

Remembering these thoughts I know that I must have been down by the river that morning. Art Showitis tends to linger.

I was due for my final check at the Clinic at half-past nine. With three hours to kill I thought, outrageously, of dropping in on my son and ex. I suppose it was Katherine Mortenhoe's fault. I told myself, as I slipped back into the booth and rang for one of my still-novel taxis, that my son and ex perhaps mightn't have noticed the spring. Perhaps

they could do with some of the bonhomie that had so cheered up Vincent.

I honestly believed that these were my motives: spring, Katherine Mortenhoe, and a simple desire to share something with someone. I could, I honestly believed, think of no other.

The suburb was just as it had always been, green baize lawns and never-fade Virginia creeper. I nearly got straight back into the taxi and went off for a ritzy breakfast on the far side of town. But they drew me, the gate I'd knocked up in a couple of Sundays, our holograph aerial that at one time had been the first down our road. They all had them now, I saw, except the Richardsons (fancy them still being there) who had this reverse snobbery thing about the Joneses. Theirs was probably hidden in their loft.

Tracey answered the doorbell on the second ring. I remembered her as a sounder sleeper. The time was just on six. "You've grown a beard," she said. It was our first meeting in over two years. Tracey feels it's some kind of weakness to show surprise.

"You haven't."

"Not for want of trying." She leaned on the edge of the door. "You wanted something?"

I wanted her to look at the spring. If I'd said so she might easily have shut the door in my face. "I'm lonely," I said instead.

"That makes two of us."

"May I warm my hands at your simple hearth?"

"You'll never learn," she said. But she stood to one side and let me in. I went through to the kitchen. Looking around, I couldn't see she'd changed a thing. "How's our little Basis for Discussion?" I said.

"I wish you wouldn't call him that. Roddie Two's fine."

I needed to start again. Smart reporter's talk was no way in. Or out. Never had been. "May I sit down?"

"You pay the rent."

"Please, Tracey. You know I've never been like that."

She tied her bathrobe tighter. "What am I supposed to do? You come in here . . . Just tell me the script, Roddie. Reconciliation? Loving daddy? Tell me the script and maybe I'll make it."

"There's no script. It was a lovely morning. I . . . don't sleep much. I just came."

"That's my lovable, impulsive Roddie." She turned away

abruptly, brushing her hair back from her face. "No—I didn't mean that. I'm glad to see you, Roddie. Real glad. But what next?"

"You could make me some eggs and coffee."

"Go away, Roddie. Go away before we start shouting. Before Roddie Two wakes up and we're all back down there in the shit."

I dared not move. One movement and I was gone.

"Sit down, Tracey." Easily, easily. "You sit down and I'll do the making."

She could have blown up in my face, but she didn't. She went to the cooker and flicked switches. I saw there was a big new chip off the enamel on the corner.

"I don't know what you want," she said, "but eggs and coffee I can just about run to."

I sat down, and launched into the story about the middle-aged woman I'd seen dancing down Oakridge. I did a good job, and she saw straight through it. She understood me, so I always said, better than I understood myself.

"This woman's got a name," she said. "You didn't say it, but you know it. You're going to use her, and you've come back to me to tell you it's OK."

"No."

"Yes."

She filled the coffeepot and set it to perk. I'd been mad, and cruel to us both, to come. Such a bright, clean, spring-filled kitchen.

"We look out for you," Tracey said. "Roddie Two and me. You haven't been around on the screen these four-five months. No trouble, I hope?"

Up to that moment, for as much as an hour, I'd forgotten. At least I'd proved to myself that it could be done. But now I remembered, and was even more certain I should go.

"No trouble," I said. "I've been . . . negotiating a new contract. In the future I'll be more behind the camera than out front."

"Directing?" She turned from the cooker, being interested in my career. "Will you like that?"

"It's more money," I said. I wanted to tell her. There was nobody in the whole world I wanted to tell, only Tracey. But Vincent there behind my eyes said no. "Look, I can't

say much about it now, Tracey. You'll hear soon enough, once PR says the moment's right."

She pushed her hair back again. It was longer now, two years longer.

"You've sold another bit of your soul," she said. "I was wrong about that woman, Roddie. You've sold another bit of your soul and you want me to clap my hands and cheer. You've come to tell me I was right. Right not to renew." She moved toward me, leaned across the table, tried to look into my eyes which I couldn't allow. "Why *are* you here, Roddie?"

I stood up. "I'd better go," I said. "It was misguided of me to come." Hopefully that would annoy her. Then I could go away, and feel aggrieved, rejected.

"Misguided?" She didn't annoy that easily. "I like that word misguided. You know, Roddie, for all of two minutes I thought you'd come back."

I didn't remind her it was she who hadn't renewed. I went at last to the garden door, unlocked it. As always, the key stuck a bit. "I meant it about the more money, Tracey. Roddie Two's got a rich daddy."

"Won't you stay and see him?"

"I'd like you two to find a bigger place. Somewhere he can see a field. Maybe a cow."

And still she refused her dislike. "Come to bed, Roddie." She held out one hand. "There was always that."

I wanted to make love to her. We made the best love. I'd wanted to make love to her from the moment she'd said she was lonely too. But Vincent there behind my eyes said yes. Yes, yes, yes.

She didn't need much telling. Two seconds and she lowered her outstretched hand. "I don't have a lover," she said. "If that's what you're thinking."

"They're all the rage," I said.

I was finding it extraordinarily difficult to get out through that open garden door. And we'd been through that kind of talk ten minutes ago.

"Now I do give up." She held up fingers, counting them off. "If it's not sex, and if it's not guilt, and if it's not Roddie Two, and if it's not my home cooking, then I do give up."

She only played that kind of game when she was upset, I mean really upset. I closed my eyes and lowered my head so that she wouldn't see, and crossed the room to her, and

put my arms around her. I felt her shoulder blades under my hands and her breasts against my chest. She welcomed me, and I kissed her. I meant *wait for me.*

We stood like that for a long time, just remembering each other, till the pain behind my eyes began to build, and the salacious giggles of the blacked-out office boys. Then I stood back from her and opened my eyes, and wished to God that for those office boys she didn't have to look so kissed.

"I must go," I said. And meant *wait for me.*

I meant what I had no right to mean, what I had no right to offer, what I had no right even to want. She looked at me, into my violated eyes.

"Yes," she said. "I suppose you must."

I went out of the kitchen and quickly around the side of the house, leaving her to the coffee percolating steadfastly on the stove.

"Yes," she said. "I suppose you must." No regret.

Green baize lawns and never-fade Virginia creeper.

"Yes," she said. "I suppose you must." No pleasure.

Swollen crocuses, outsize beyond the call of duty.

"Yes," she said. "I suppose you must." Risking nothing, afraid of commitment, afraid of being hurt. . . .

It was all I had to go on. Knowing Tracey, it was a lot. I ran. I leaped and bounded. But for the memory of dancing Katherine Mortenhoe, I might have danced. One was what one was, I believed: and I was a newsman. No conceivable set of circumstances could ever change that. And she was unalterably she. But I ran. The impossible, I thought, if I thought, and I didn't think, thinking it now instead, the impossible takes slightly longer. I ran, gasping, and walked, and came to a thruway, and found a transport motel, and ordered a man-size breakfast. The office boys could make what they liked of me. I had within me, like Katherine Mortenhoe, the possibility of joy.

She woke again at half-past eight and immediataly grasped the day ahead. It would be one of plans, decisions. Harry had been quite right to suggest going away somewhere. The farther the better. She bounced off the bed, caught sight of her crumpled clothes in the mirrror, rubbed them down with her Smoothie, and revolved slowly, considering her reflection. Not bad for forty-four, and the grave only twenty-

six days off. She went in search of Harry's travel brochures. It was odd how the old ways of thought lingered. She hadn't heard of a grave, not a real corpse-and-coffin grave, not in ten or fifteen years. Herself, she'd give her altered organism to a medical school: young ones—well, middle-aged ones—must be fairly hard to come by. She looked in the desk, and behind the clock, and in the drawer of the kitchen table. Then she tried the bedroom. Finally she roused Harry.

"I can't find the travel brochures," she said.

He woke more easily now. "There were reporters," he said. "Didn't you have a hard time getting in?" And then gathering consciousness, "I was up till nearly two. Where were you?"

She sat down on the bed and told him. About Mr. Mathiesson, about the crash, about her early morning visit to the police station. He enjoyed, as he always did, hearing about her exciting life. Neither of them spoiled the moment with allusions to the other's bad behavior.

"So now we've got three days' grace," she said. "Get-away time. Over the hills and a great way off."

"Won't they follow us?"

"Not if we're clever. We must make clever plans. Starting with those travel brochures you showed me."

He withdrew a little. "You didn't seem all that interested," he said. "I . . . threw them away."

"Never mind." She kissed him on the forehead. "We can easily get some more."

"I promised Vincent I'd let him know if we left town."

"You'll have to break your promise."

"I sort of signed something."

"What can he do, my darling? He'll never have the face to take you to court."

Harry fiddled with the bedclothes. "It's all very well for you," he said, almost inaudibly.

Katherine considered. It was indeed all very well for her: in a few weeks' time she'd be out of it, beyond the reach of the longest legal arm. And poor Harry wouldn't. He'd worry dreadfully. Perhaps she was asking too much of him.

"Harry . . ." She didn't quite know how to say it. "Harry love, what exactly did you tell Mr. Mathiesson?"

She asked him, though she didn't want to know. He frowned, trying to remember.

"Which one was he? There were so many reporters."

"What did you tell him about our renewal, Harry?"

"There were so many reporters."

"He was from the *Morning News*. He was a clever one—I bet he looked up the Registry. I just wondered what you'd told him about our renewal."

"Oh, that one. You mean the one from the *Morning News*." There was a long pause. "Do you really think I'd discuss our renewal with a reporter, Kate?"

"I just wondered. He said—"

"Reporters say anything. Anything at all. As if I'd discuss our renewal with— Anyway, what could I say?"

"He's dead now, Harry. So it really doesn't matter."

"But you believe him. You think—"

"He's dead, Harry. And besides, I didn't believe him. I knew perfectly well you'd never—"

"What did he say? Tell me what he said."

She stood up. "He was a silly, squalid little newshound. And it's time we had some breakfast."

She rang off, and went out of the bedroom, along the passage, into the kitchen. But the line remained, if faint, still inconveniently connected.

"You wouldn't have brought him up if you hadn't at least partly believed him."

She ran water loudly into the stainless steel sink. Brought him up . . . it was a good way of putting it. Mr. Mathiesson was vomit; sour, stinking vomit. She wouldn't allow him, his lies, to take Harry away from her even for a moment. Harry appeared, naked, in the kitchen doorway.

"You'd always"—baring his soul—"choose to believe other people rather than me."

She smiled at him desperately, having no other refuge. Till the doorbell rang, and saved them both. She pushed past Harry, went to the door, opened the grille.

"Can't you see the sticker?" she said.

"Postman. Prepaid personal delivery." He held up a bundle of letters.

"I don't want them."

"Mrs. Mortenhoe? The office don't like it when I don't deliver."

She set the door on its chain, and opened it. The postman passed the letters in through the crack.

"Thanks," he said. "A lot of people paid a lot of money to get these letters to you on your doorstep."

She took the letters and closed the door.

"Mrs. Mortenhoe? What's it feel like, Mrs. Mortenhoe? I read about you in the papers, Mrs. Mortenhoe. At the office there was plenty wanted this job, Mrs. Mortenhoe, but it was me on the rota."

She snapped the grille shut, and returned to the kitchen. Out of deference to the postman outside the door Harry had wrapped a towel around his waist. She gave him the letters, she didn't want them, and stood reconstituting milk for his cereal. The last time a letter had been delivered was two years before, a court summons for excessive water use. Now, suddenly, at one time, there were thirty-two.

Harry opened them carefully, using a kitchen knife, fumbling the enclosures, telling her everying she didn't want to know about each. The first he picked was from a bedding manufacturer, sending her a colored catalog, and promising her the bed of her choice, queen-size, "for as long as she might reasonably be deemed to have need of it," plus five thousand pounds, in return for the right to use her name in his worldwide advertising. The decision was hers, of course, but a representative would call that afternoon at three with several private demonstration models in case she felt, in her present situation, disinclined to visit her neighborhood showroom.

Other enterprises were less discreet. If she had been willing, with only four weeks left, to live her dwindling days to the full via a wide range of soft drinks, hair conditioners, chocolate bars, hi-fi sets, sexual appliances, nicotine-free cigarettes, and instant spray-on wallpaper, she could, Harry calculated, enrich her residual estate by some seventeen thousand pounds. Furthermore, a mountain leisure center famous for its Rocky Haven Waffles offered her four weeks' free accommodation for herself and her husband, plus a single room and exclusive use of the camp chapel for an additional seven-day period. All this in exchange for the simple statement that if she'd only discovered the mountain air (and the Waffles) sooner she was sure she'd have lived to a hundred and ten. Their representative would be calling at two-thirty.

There were wheelchair brochures, and some tasteful electronic respirators, both firms offering immediate delivery, no deposit terms, and representatives already on their way. Jesus Christ the Second, in orange ink on purple paper, offered

no money and wanted none, demanding access to Mrs. Martin Lois' immortal soul instead.

Among a crop of TV and newspaper proposals there were also, addressed to Harry but given away by their black-edged notepaper, several communications from morticians.

Reading all this lasted straight through breakfast and on into the morning. Harry was a great one for letters, taking them very seriously, as proofs that he existed. Prepaid personal delivery letters proved in addition that people wanted him to exist. At first Katherine humored him. After the first six or seven, however, she began to find the whole thing excruciatingly funny. He tried to join in her laughter, but went on all the same carefully putting on one side all those letters that contained firm offers of goods or cash. This made her laugh more than ever. Poor, dear, *provident* Harry. . . . Her own collection was of representatives' arrival times. Between two and six that afternoon seventeen salesmen were expected, eleven of these having chosen the peak period between two-thirty and four. And every single one of them would get no farther than the front door sticker.

"Harry," she said, suddenly not laughing, "Harry love, just how much did Vincent Ferriman offer you when you talked with him a couple of days ago?"

Harry looked up from a casket catalog he was trying not to let her see. "It doesn't matter," he said.

"Was it as much as seven hundred thousand pounds?"

"I told you, it doesn't matter. None of all this matters. I wouldn't touch a penny of their bloody money."

"I might, Harry. If they paid quickly enough I could have a mink and two Cadillacs, and all those things a girl is supposed to want."

"Now you're being vulgar."

How sweetly pompous he was. "Is it really vulgar to want to be cosseted in my declining weeks?"

"We mustn't talk like this."

"I'm afraid we must, Harry." She leaned across the table, gathered all the pieces of paper and tapped them into a neat pile which she kept on her lap. He was right: her laughter *had* been vulgar. But then, so had all the letters and brochures been vulgar. "We must talk properly," she said, "about the future."

He got up. She realized he was still wearing his ridiculous towel. He went about the kitchen arranging things that didn't

need arranging. He was rather fat. He needed her comfort, not her questions, but he couldn't always be given in to. "After I'm dead," she said firmly, pleased with her courage, "after I'm dead you must get away. You'll have to leave your job. You'll need a new one. You'll need money."

"We have money."

Indeed they did. That was why the flat was tiny. That was why they didn't own a hologram, or rent a newspaper receiver. They were saving for a self-contained domestic unit in a good retirement area. They were saving for their old age. She tried to find this as funny as the brochures had been, and failed.

"You'll need a lot."

"What for?"

"You'll need to make a new start."

"What for?"

Childish self-pity wouldn't stop her. A new life had to be envisaged for him, full of satisfactions he'd make for himself. He didn't want to hear, of course. He wanted to be hugged, and told everything was going to be all right. She'd lie to him later, but not at this moment. He shouldn't have let her see how fat he was.

"You don't make friends easily. You should have a nice home, smart car, plenty of good cassettes and expensive food. . . . Then again, how about job qualifications? I don't expect you'll find another place all that easily. You'll need money for all this. Lots of money. And then there's the question of another wife—"

He didn't often turn on her. He believed himself henpecked, and was happy secretly to resent it and never do anything about it. He thought of this as self-control (which it wasn't), and it made him feel superior. Just occasionally, however, the humiliations were too great, even for him.

"What's the matter with you," he said, "is that you won't dare think about the things that really count. Instead you fill your head up with money, and bad jokes, and what's going to happen to me, and who you hate and who you don't, and how you're going to fool the reporters, and . . . anything except what really counts." He flapped his arms. "Soon you're going to die, Kate. You're going to get iller and iller, and finally die. That's what you ought to be thinking about. Just stop nagging at me, Kate. There are more important things to be getting on with."

He stopped. He'd made his speech. And he'd misjudged its length. Halfway through there'd been contact: four sentences later she'd had time to clothe his words in his paltry nakedness, in the areas of flab that joggled as he talked. If he got much more worked up, she thought, his towel would fall off.

She squared the papers briskly in her lap. His undignified outburst was best not mentioned. "I tell you what," she said, "if we're both not going in to work today, let's have an outing! Get out of this flat. We've got the sticker if anyone bothers us. Let's go and see the Castle. It's ridiculous how people living in a city never get to see the sights it's famous for."

She stood up, dazzled him with her smile, and went out of the room, taking the letters and brochures with her. . . . Perhaps *some* response, some explanation was needed. "You'll feel better when you've got some clothes on," she suggested over her shoulder, going into the sitting room and putting the papers carefully away in the desk.

I arrived at the Clinic punctually, full of my transport motel breakfast, full of spring and the old-fashioned joys of. The MEN were ready for me. The Micro-Electro-Neurologists. Their white plastic casings were called clothes: their means of audible communication went by the name of speech. Three of them, photosensitive, audio-linked, tactile-orientated, their discerners clicking, their programs running AOK, they locomoted around, hooked up to, the mechanism returned for confirmation.

Me.

Or such of me as concerned them.

Which such, on that liberated, spring-in-the-blood morning, wasn't much such.

They fixed me. "Try not to blink," they said, and stared down dazzling needles. So I tried not to blink, and thought of wealth and fame and Vincent and Katherine Mortenhoe. And Tracey who would wait until these were all, miraculously, behind me. Until, miraculously, I had bought myself back.

"Watch the point of light," they told me. "Watch the pencil. Watch the red and then the green. Watch this film. Watch this different film. Wait for the injection. Now watch the point of light. Watch the pencil. Watch the red and then

the green. Watch this film. Watch this different film. Wait for the EEG. Now watch the point of light. Watch the pencil. Watch the red and then the green. Watch this film. Watch this different film."

Once, accidentally, they said, "Does this hurt?" to which I said, "Yes," because it did. And thought of Tracey.

They told me at last, rubbing their sensitive, multidimensional manipulators and simulating joy, that implant function was up to expectation. I didn't argue. Implant function had been up to expectation from the moment the bandages came off. And in glorious Trucolor too. They hummed and buzzed, and said their only remaining doubts concerned impedance in retinal nerve endings. (My retinal nerve endings.) Acute darkness caused circuit hunting. Circuit hunting, if protracted, caused burn-up. And burn-up—how nicely they put it—caused permanent destruction of retinal function. Permanent destruction of retinal function.

It was a cheering thought—not new, but never before expressed so baldly. I shared their concern. It would be downright irresponsible of me, after all this expense, to end up blind.

They said they were glad they'd dealt with the problem of sleep. The new drugs were marvelous, weren't they? *Weren't they?* And pre-burn-up pain gave ample warning, should I ever carelessly wander into a darkened room. Perhaps I should carry a flashlight in case of emergencies. And a card too—they'd had one printed—to go with my blood group and health insurance in case I had an accident. Apart from anything else, the power pack in my neck could become dangerously radioactive if tampered with. But I wasn't to worry. Worry caused hypertension, and hypertension made people accident prone. The new drugs were marvelous, weren't they? *Weren't they?*

I promised them I wouldn't worry. And the new drugs were indeed marvelous. I really, honestly, hardly felt tired at all. But where now was Tracey?

They patted me. Total unconsciousness, on the other hand, was perfectly safe. It triggered electrical changes, sensor blackout. It jargoned jargon. I told them I was glad to hear it, and thanked them. At least I understood my son a little better now. Possibly it was his closeness to me, his prophetic soul, that had made him so congenitally afraid of the dark.

They released me from their various appliances and I

went, trying not to run, out of their mat-black gadget box, out into sunlit offices and the more human inquiries of the doctors. And after the doctors, the psychiatrist. When all I wanted was to get away and buy that flashlight, and a good supply of batteries.

"My favorite cyborg," he said, not rising. "You must come and tell me all about it."

"All about what?"

A degree of aggression would be expected. Not that I cared. Dr. Klausen didn't sit at a desk, but in one of those womb-things hanging on a chain from the ceiling. There were three other chairs in the room, and he did nothing to help me choose. Presumably the one I picked would be significant. Of something. To put the interview on its right footing I chose a hard, upright chair that left me facing the window, with Klausen almost in silhouette against it. If I was to be interrogated, then I was to be interrogated. Not, of course, that I cared.

"Tell you all about what?" I said.

"You're a professional interviewer. You know how much time can be wasted by the subject pretending not to understand the question."

"I also know how much time can be wasted by making the question too unspecific."

I was expecting him to twiddle his chair on its piece of chain, but he didn't. "If you want a battle, we can easily have one. This isn't a selection board—you went through that months ago. If I was wrong then, it's certainly far too late to reverse my decision now."

"Then what am I here for?"

"Typically, you never asked my reasons for recommending you."

That "typically" got me. "And, equally typically, you're going to tell me all the same."

"It annoys you that any of your actions should be predictable?"

"No. It annoys me that you should think yourself so clever for predicting them."

"If I sounded like that, I'm sorry."

He might have been sincere. But interrogators went in for sincerity: they took a course in it at Interrogators' School.

"All right," I said, humoringly, "tell me why you recommended me."

He had it planned. "You were an outsider. You were also exceptionally stable."

"I'm an outsider now, all right."

"And now with good surgical reason, which is a relief to you."

"No!"

My anger was not so much at his cruel lie as at the way he'd tricked me into denying it. *"Yes," she'd said, "I suppose you must." And cared.* Something—my famous stability?—prevented me, but only just, from laying violent hands on him, where he sat, quite motionless, observing, on the end of his long black chain. I had no words, words that could not be ridiculed, for my secret hope. And no violence either.

"You're wrong, Klausen," was all I could say. "Believe me, you're wrong."

He moved at last, lifting his feet so that the chair swung slowly. "Convince me," he said.

"Why should I bother?"

"Because you bothered to contradict me in the first place. We both know it was my report more than anything else that got you the job. We weren't always on opposite sides."

He was saying he'd given me something to blame. He'd also provided himself as a scapegoat for the blame for the blame. I might have known any coin Klausen tossed would have two heads.

"We never did speak the same language," I said, in non-reply.

"I'm sure you realize, Roddie, that your alienation is not basically from other people but from yourself."

"That's what the book says."

"Books are often right."

His pathetic, priestlike complacency no longer bothered me. "So that's what I'm here for? So that you can tell me how much I hate myself?"

"Telling you what you already know is one thing. Getting you to admit it is another."

Once this incredible man had taken me in. But in those days, of course, he'd had something I needed. . . . I caught myself shifting my ass from one flabby side to the other, and went right on doing it. He could watch me and smile to himself at his wisdom as much as he liked.

"Know thyself, saith the prophet." Anyway, the fucking

chairs were hard, so what did he expect? "Which, being interpreted, Klausen, means jack off like crazy."

He made like he'd heard it all before. "I doubt if you can do even that now, with Vincent watching."

"He needn't know. I can turn down the sound and look the other way."

Too late I saw he'd won the point. But he graciously let it pass. "Did you turn down the sound before you came in here?" he asked.

"I'm not even wearing the gear. It came off for the doctors, and I carefully didn't put it back."

"I'm glad." He heaved himself out of his chair, needing a new paragraph, and went to the window. The Clinic had Clinic grounds, a Clinic fountain, Clinic trees. "This stability of yours," he said to the Clinic grass, "it's going to be strained. I wanted you to understand how much."

He expected some response, but got none.

"That's all, Roddie. I just wanted you to understand how much."

My silence pitied him. My God, Klausen turned me off.

"And I think you do. You're nobody's fool, Roddie. You understand very well. I hope you make it."

He seemed to have finished, so I got up and left. It seemed to me that the score was fairly even. And I had work to do, even if he hadn't. I had an appointment after lunch with Clement Pyke, father to the only true Katherine Mortenhoe.

Katherine found the Castle packed solid with parties of children and afternoon shift workers whiling away the sunny morning. Movement inside its walls was only possible in the wake of the quarter-hourly conducted tours. She and Harry waited in line, then tagged along, across the drawbridge (labeled Drawbridge), through the keep (labeled Keep), around the roped-off (and labeled) inner courtyard, and into the labeled Great Hall. They moved slowly, keeping as far back as they could from the guide's piercing PA system.

In the armory (labeled Armoury) beyond the Great Hall there was a long wait, people piling in behind, while the party strung itself out up the famous 300-step spiral staircase. The ascent was slow and claustrophobic, and, as it progressed, was made increasingly difficult by breathless climbers

sitting on the steps to rest. Kate was proud of Harry: he made it to the top in one.

The Castle stood on a steep little hill in the middle of the city, its gray towers higher than all but the tallest of the surrounding point blocks. The guide interrupted his intoned but lurid description of past glories and spent several minutes identifying present landmarks. His party, showing their first signs of real animation, hung over the labeled Battlements, shrieking and gesticulating as they picked out their own areas, and possibly even their own windows in their own residential buildings. The past meant nothing to them. Their security lay in recognizing the ornaments on the mantelpiece of this year's flat. Katherine drew Harry out of the circulation flow, into an embrasure (labeled Embrasure). These same people, on the moors or by the sea, would stay within the safe, six-foot ambience of their motorcars.

Harry squared his shoulders. "Just think of being a sentry," he said, "up here on a windy night." He gazed around proprietorially, stamping his halberd and clinking his coat of mail.

And then, suddenly and inconveniently, quite without warning, she had her first paralysis.

She'd expected the rigor first, and the tight feeling around her scalp, but neither of these happened. She just lurched against Harry and he sensibly propped her up. It wasn't a bad paralysis, just one leg as far as the knee really, but she was grateful to Harry for being there, and for being so sensible. Otherwise she could easily have fallen down and bumped herself.

He whispered kind things to her and she leaned on the comfortable (not fat) bulk of him, trying to think if there had been some sensation in the last few minutes that might have warned her. She'd heard, for example, that epileptics saw flashing lights or smelled funny smells. Either would be useful. But she could remember nothing of the sort. . . . A castle attendant (labeled Castle Attendant) pushed toward them through the landmark-spotting crowd.

"None of that," he said. "The Castle Trustees don't have to stand for none of that."

Harry went very red. "My wife felt faint, officer." He moved away from Katherine, letting her stagger. "You can see for yourself she can hardly stand."

The attendant watched her. "This is Castle Property,

mate. If she's drunk or high I shall have to report the matter."

"She's neither of those things. She's—"

The attendant shaded his eyes against the sun. "I've got it now. I reckon she's this Mrs. Whatsit there's all the fuss about. I seen her picture in the paper."

He moved closer, and stared into her face. Afraid that he was going to help her, Katherine tried to tell him to go away. Her jaw flapped up and down. The paralysis was only in one leg, so why couldn't she speak? But it was all right: the attendant had no intention of helping her.

With her face on a hundred million screens and front pages, Katherine had been able to reach the Castle unnoticed. Ordinary people on the street did not see their fellows—this was how they kept sane. But now however, by behaving unsuitably in an embrasure on the Castle battlements, Katherine had drawn attention to herself.

"Keep back!" the attendant shouted, putting into people's minds the fact that there was something to be kept back from. So they kept back, closer and closer.

"Poor thing. Why ain't she in a home?"

"It's him I blame, bringing her up all this way."

"Course, she's a good bit younger in her picture."

"Hoping to push her off, I reckon."

"PG sticker and all—who does she think she is?"

"Push her off? Do me a favor—not if he knows which side his bread's buttered."

"Couldn't have something ordinary, not like the rest of us."

"Mind you, she's pale all right."

"Never heard of paint and powder? What some folks'll do for money. . . ."

While at the back of the crowd a man stood quietly watching, his gray-green jacket slung over his shoulder on account of the heat.

Katherine closed her eyes against the jostling mouths. And behind her the smooth stone parapet, and beyond it the wind. By the time she could speak again there was nothing anyone would want to say. Sensation returned to her leg, and she walked.

"And a lot of fuss about nothing *that* was. If you ask me."

"PR, love. Haven't you heard of PR?"

The conducted tour schedule was now seriously out of

joint. The guide had phoned down and called a halt in the armory, but still the people were two abreast on the spiral staircase, and shouting angrily, and feeling faint. Since going back was clearly impossible, and the emergency stairs were only for real emergencies, Katherine and Harry were forced on their aggrieved companions for the entire allotted course. The guide wisely abbreviated his spiel, for few now cared, and got them out in fourteen minutes flat. Possibly the Castle had known less worthy occasions in its seven hundred years, but somehow Katherine doubted it.

"Disgusting. She oughtn't to be allowed out, not among normal healthy people."

"I'm going to get my money back."

These were her audience, the grief-starved public of Vincent Ferriman. And he was right, of course: sanitize her agony, interpolate a TV screen, a director's sensibility, and these same people would experience veritable orgies of compassion. It was only face to face that they feared her. It was only face to face that, given a leader, they'd have torn her limb from limb.

Outside the Castle, beyond the drawbridge, a group of reporters were waiting. She and Harry, unclean, had been allowed to the head of the party filing out through the turnstile marked *Out*. She was first onto the drawbridge, leaning on Harry's arm. Seeing her, the reporters shouted and surged, and popped their cameras. People clicked eagerly through the turnstile behind her, pushing her forward. The reporters, knowing the law, eased her to one side and closed in on Harry.

"Exactly what happened, Mr. Mortenhoe?"

"Did you save her, Mr. Mortenhoe?"

"Was she trying to kill herself?"

"What are your plans, Mr. Mortenhoe?"

"After this, do you feel you were justified in bringing her to a public place?"

"Just answer me this—was she trying to kill herself?"

Harry tried to force his way through to her. "Private grief," he shouted. "Leave us alone. Private grief. . . ."

Somebody laughed. "Where's your sticker, Mr. Mortenhoe? Suppose you tell us what it feels like, knowing you'll soon be Newly Single?"

Harry lowered his head and pushed through, beating at them savagely as he went. He wasn't very good at it. But a

reporter's nose was bloodied and a camera spun out of another's hand and was trampled upon. The voices, knowing their rights, grew angry. Harry was tripped, and fell heavily. The voices gathered around.

Katherine stood, unmolested, in a still circle of legality, and watched him being helped to his feet. Watched him being accidentally shoved so that he fell down again.

She began screaming. It was the only thing she could think of to do. Coarse, humiliating, painful, detestable, the only thing she could think of to do. She screamed in steady, unremitting blasts, her hands linked loosely across her stomach, her handbag tucked under one arm, well aware of her acute ugliness. She sounded ugly, she looked ugly. But the crowd's attention, which had been Harry's, was hers again.

In the sudden silence her screams beat back at her from the gray walls of the Castle behind. Once started, her screaming was easy to continue. It was all that seemed right on that sunny, grief-starved morning. Harry went to her, was permitted to go to her. His coat was torn, his hair untidy, but otherwise he seemed unhurt. Something, possibly shame, lay heavily on the still, angry crowd. And she went on screaming because she daren't stop.

There were taxis waiting, taxis that had brought the reporters and their gear. Harry led her to one of these—no one else would touch her, know her—opened the door, and treading a knife-edge of high-handedness, helped her in. The crowd moved then, slowly closer. He told the driver where to go, then climbed in after her. He said, "Thank you, Kate."

She sat in the back of the taxi, screaming in steady, unremitting blasts. No doubt the driver would soon complain. As he started to move off the crowd pressed around, trying —now it was impossible—to reach her, hands catching at the door handles, scrabbling at the windows. Harry said, "That's enough now, Kate."

He would never stop her. He would sit beside her, patiently wanting her to stop. He would dislike her. But he would never make her stop. He was Harry. She held tightly onto the edge of the seat, and watched the shopfronts reel by, and was abruptly silent, fighting the terrible need that continued in her body. Her mind too, one part of it, continued to scream. Harry said, "Well done."

They reached home without further incident, without further conversation. The screaming faded. Safe finally behind

their PG-stickered front door, they stood together in the lobby, the sweat cooling under their arms, and with it the last of the sustaining excitement. Harry released her. "Sorry about that," he said, generously pretending that some of it, somewhere, somehow, had been his fault.

She dragged her feet slowly through into the sitting room, and lay down on the settee. His fault? She closed her eyes. Whose fault? If she had had an excuse for going to the Castle—other than the obvious one of stopping, of not answering his flab-joggling, towel-imperiling harangue—it had been the hope of reaching back, of finding perspective. Seven hundred years, seeable and touchable, would make death seem right and proper. . . . It was a reasonable hope. So that in a way (although he'd never see it) her nonanswer to Harry would answer him after all. And *fault* wouldn't come into it.

But the seven hundred years had been unavailable. People had got in the way. She lay with her eyes closed, quietly testing the dexterity of her hands. She could oppose her thumbs. She had a long way yet.

The morning's events had taken Harry differently, made him restless, full of plans. He ranged about the room, throwing out suggestions, places to go. She listened to him, felt affectionate, even loving, but isolated all the same on her slippery, twenty-six-day decline. In the end she had to interrupt.

"We're not going anywhere," she said. "We're staying here. We're talking in whispers, and drawing the blinds against the helicopters, and disconnecting all the bells. We're staying here, in the one place where we're safe." And sliding quietly, *privately,* down to death.

He stopped his pacing. "What about the shopping?" He was patient with her. "Remember I'm known in the district. If I go—"

"In a few hours you'll be known in every district. And where you aren't known, you'll be followed. We'll have the shopping delivered."

"I don't like to say this, Katherine, but I think you overestimate public interest in your case."

"Do I?"

"Yes. A few more days and they'll be on to something else."

"From a find to a check, from a check to a view, from a view to a death in the morning. . . ."

"You're upset, Katherine."

"It's a quotation, Harry. Peel's view halloo. . . . You're forgetting I majored in Folk Lore."

"You told me Computer Science."

She felt her scalp tightening. "We're staying here," she said quietly. "Here where we're safe."

He sat down beside her and took her still dexterous hands and looked into her still nonhallucinating eyes. "Katherine love, we'd go mad. Nobody could live like that. We'd start hating each other. We'd go mad."

Of course he was quite right. "Of course you're quite right," she said. And suddenly saw that the only way for her to endure what remained was totally on her own. Where the madness would be hers only, and perhaps a comfort. "We'll think of somewhere we can go. There must be somewhere."

She gripped his hands, and pulled him closer, and kissed him on the mouth, and afterward whispered, "I'm sorry, love," in that intimate, unspecific way that allows no answer. He patted her and they kissed again, Katherine wondering all the while just how she was going to be rid of him, and he of her. The burden they presented to each other was intolerable.

Katherine Mortenhoe's father, Clement Pyke, lived alone down in the old docks, aboard the coverted fiberglass hull of an ex-river police hydrofoil. It took me nearly an hour to find him, weaving my scooter between old crane tracks and derelict warehouses and sky-high piles of rusting boiler tubing. It was real fringie country, though I didn't on my way in see any.

Pyke's boat turned out to be one of probably thirty, stacked out from the side of a huge dry dock and floating right down at the bottom in two or three feet of scum. The ladder down was rickety, the whole setup—electric cables, freshwater hoses, gangplanks—terribly impermanent. The area, I knew, was scheduled for imminent high-density, Venice-style redevelopment.

Clement Pyke was up on deck, leaning on the rail, taking the afternoon sun. He had the air of someone who has been in the same place in the same position for a long time.

This time could much better have been employed on boat maintenance, but Mr. Pyke was hardly dressed for doing-it-himself. In his late sixties, he wore—possibly for my benefit—an immaculate red sombrero, a curious, much-fringed and laced-up leather shirt, and tight green trousers that I could have told him only emphasized the inadequacies of his ancient equipment. His boots were crimson, and weighted down with brass buckles. Normally I like a man who takes thought for his appearance.

I went down the ladder, breathing in a sudden green chill. Pyke must have spotted me about three boats off, for he abruptly jerked into action and began intently polishing a once-chromed ventilator with his yellow bandanna. I stumbled on, and finally hailed him from his own transom—or counter, or whatever the back end of those old H.F.'s was called. At the sound of my voice he took off his hat and shaded his eyes with it. He had an unnecessarily black black beard and hair combed forward so that it might have been a wig but probably wasn't. . . . I noticed all this because I sensed that this was all I'd get: the attitude was the man; the continuous Clement Pyke was by now no more than the extension of one carefully-chosen moment.

"Roddie child," he said, not overplaying the surprise bit, "you've come. Unscathed you've come. You've found our shitty little colony. Our *rive gauche*."

He held out his hand for me to shake, consciously archaic, so I joined him and did. "Mr. Pyke," I began, "it's really very good of you to—"

"Clement, child, Clement." He retained my hand. "Pyke sounds as if you think I'm going to bite."

Dutifully I chalked up the joke's fifty thousandth polite smile. But he'd left me nothing to pin him with—total strangers' first names don't come to me all that easy. I disentangled my hand.

"This isn't an interview under the meaning of the Act," I said, just to get things straight. "I'm here to—"

"I've been interviewed, buggered about, by all sorts." He replaced his hat. "Belgrade, Tokyo, Sydney—I know the form. You're after free fucking info. Something for nothing, child, in a hard, hard world."

"If you'd rather make it official I can perfectly well—"

He held up a lordly hand. Evidently I wasn't going to finish many sentences that afternoon. "I told your network

when they rang, Roddie child. I said, it's funny how some people are news for the way they live, while others achieve fame only in the fashion of their dying." He smiled, and waited for the applause that only he heard. "You'll have noticed," he went on, "that poor Katherine is not exactly my favorite person."

From what I'd already seen of him, this didn't surprise me, but I asked him all the same. "Why is that?" I said.

"It's a bloody smashing afternoon," he said, looking up and around, as if discovering his surroundings for the first time. "Shall we stay up here for this interview that isn't an interview?"

I agreed. Crossing his deck I'd caught a glimpse through a skylight of the boat's interior—weird posters, and mobiles, and outlandish musical instruments, and racks and racks of lurid books that were probably his. I felt I'd weather the blast of his ego better up here in the open air. He squatted boyishly on a hatch cover and I perched beside him. He hadn't been dodging my question, merely building the tension.

"Katherine and I," he announced, "are like oil and water. I don't grieve for her dying because I don't feel she has ever lived. She's never got her nose up out of the shit. There's no tragedy, child, in losing what you've never had."

I wasn't there to argue with him. "Why do you think she got like that?"

"You mean, whose fault was it? Certainly not mine. I've *lived* my life. I didn't start writing till I was forty, you know. It was my third wife knew I had it in me. Before that I'd had at least three different and successful careers. Since then . . . well, a hundred and thirty books isn't exactly dragging my feet."

I didn't ask him about the "different and successful careers"—they'd certainly been different, but hardly what most people would have called successful. And his present shabby life-style told me all I needed to know about the hundred and thirty books.

"At least you'll be pleased that your daughter has done so well in a field associated with literature."

"No."

His flat denial managed to encompass both his own total lack of pleasure and Computabook's total disassociation with anything he could possibly regard as literature. I felt like

challenging this position *pace* his own hundred and thirty books . . . but I was there to gather information on Katherine Mortenhoe, not to parade the inadequacies of her father. Vincent, I was sure, in his padded viewing room, would appreciate my forbearance.

"Perhaps Katherine would have been happier with a brother or a sister," I suggested.

This seemed a new idea to him. He considered it. "My second wife had children. . . . As far as I know, Katherine hated the sight of them. She certainly came to me quickly enough when I moved on." He stretched his legs out straight and innocently leaned back on his elbows. "I've always been bloody *young*, you see. Accessible, full of enthusiasm. If she's told you she was lonely, she never had any fucking need to be."

"I haven't yet spoken to her." There'd been only one baby in Clement's marriages, and that one hadn't been Katherine. "Can you tell me anything about her first husband?"

"Gerry? A complete drear. The only bright thing he ever did was to move on. Even then, he wasted it. Child, so many people don't understand the pace of life. Everything changes. Every fucking thing. Security . . . personal progress . . . finish one thing before you start another—all a load of cobblers. Look at me. But Gerry stuck with his old thing, whatever it was. Haven't heard of him in years."

Gerald Mortenhoe's "old thing" was teaching. He was headmaster now in a big rural comprehensive. On the face of it, he and Katherine had been ideally suited. Another father might have been able to tell me why it hadn't worked.

"Was it your idea," I said, sticking to facts, "that Katherine should go into computers?"

He screwed up his eyes. "I doubt it. I was probably in Rome at the time. . . . Of course, it was just the sort of thing I knew she'd be good at. No flesh and blood, if you know what I mean. No fucking enthusiasm. Ha—that's good."

I headed him off. The sex-is-good-for-a-giggle line is decidedly old red sombrero hat these days. "You've traveled a lot," I said. "Did you often take Katherine with you?"

I knew the answer, but hoped for the reason. He gestured widely. "Campaigning, always campaigning. . . . The time in Rome, for example, was overpopulation. We held a real jumpin' rally outside St. Peter's. Then there was a whistle-

stop on pollution took me across three continents. You couldn't cart a girl around on things like that."

Another man might have, and made a total mess of her: little girls went big on campaign platforms. So at least he'd spared her that. . . . Also his causes had been good causes, so why did I feel that his association with them somehow lessened them? I thought of that "real jumpin' rally" outside St. Peter's and knew I wasn't getting anywhere. Yet there must be something, some one concrete thing that only a father would know, that he could tell me about his daughter.

I stood up and went to the rail. "The experts think she has a very special sort of mind," I said. "Did you see any signs of this when she was younger?"

"Load of shit. Don't believe a word of it. If she's really dying it's because she wants to. Millions of them do, you see. Only the simpler ways aren't allowed."

I looked out across the scummy, gray-brown water. "Then you think the experts at the Medical Center are wrong?"

"I fucking know they are." He heaved himself up and came to lean beside me. "There's nothing special about Katherine. She was a boring child and she grew into a boring woman and now she's going to die a boring death. *And* she'll eke it out—she always was afraid of hurting herself."

Perhaps he was trying to shock me with his picture of progressive, dispassionate parenthood. But I could well imagine that Katherine hadn't been altogether an endearing child.

"I tell you—I took her away on a holiday once. Couldn't have been more than seven. Smashing playground, right beside the hotel. I'd just got married, you see." He nudged me, just in case I didn't. "Couple of days, and the bloody child wouldn't go near the place. Had to cart her every morning to a park the other side of town." He broke off. "Don't mind me," he said, and unzipped his trousers and peed his disgust in a manly fashion over the side. I waited.

". . . The playground had this paddling pool. We reckoned the bloody little cunt was afraid of tumbling in and drowning. Unless of course she'd guessed my mind was on other things and didn't like it. Played all hell with the honeymoon." He finished, waved to a couple of workmen up on the side of the dock, and made a business of reconfining himself. "Oh, she's dying all right. But not of Gordon's fucking syndrome. Believe me, Roddie, she's a thoroughly

boring woman. And, like most boring people, she needs attention. You'd do yourself a favor if you forgot the whole affair."

I almost believed him. Till I remembered her face in that brief moment in the doctor's office before she got the screen up. "And did a feature on you instead," I said. But my irony was wasted.

"You might do worse," he murmured. "A hundred and thirty books in twenty-odd years. If SF's on the map today, you know who put it there."

I left him soon after. He'd got through five wives, this pathetic old man who couldn't bear for his daughter to have anything, not even a rare and fatal condition. By all accounts he was well on his way to a sixth at that moment. I just hoped she wasn't looking forward to being fathered.

I found my scooter in the middle of a group of the fringie kids who were camping in the surrounding warehouses. It wasn't a proper village, not like in the old Container Depot a couple of miles away: just some people who were on the way from somewhere to somewhere, and pausing. They hadn't damaged the scooter, but it was covered with little cut-out cows and Earth Mother stickers. The cow was a great nature symbol that month. The kids stood around, waiting to see what I'd do. And they weren't all kids either. I didn't tell them I was a newsman: a few years back the media had taken up Fringe Groups in a big way, and it had got so that the fringies were virtually putting on shows twice nightly for the visiting cameramen. So they'd started saying no, and the media men had started getting nasty, and attitudes had solidified the way they always do. So, not wanting a necklace of boiler tubing, I smiled, and mimed like me was heap good fella, and motored discreetly away, taking my cut-out cows and Earth Mother stickers with me.

I hadn't seen any of the other inhabitants on Clement Pyke's mooring, but if they were anything like him I reckoned they gave the fringies a fair amount of innocent amusement.

On my way back to NTV House I tried to convince myself that the afternoon had been profitable. I tried to see my inner picture of the continuous, the only true, Katherine Mortenhoe filling out. But it just wasn't so. Her father had shown me convincing bases for a selfish, joyless, death-wished woman. Yet I'd seen her only that morning—Christ,

how long my days were—dancing down the street. And earlier, in the doctor's office, I'd seen the angry despair of a woman with a lot to do and no longer any time to do it in. Nothing fitted. And I didn't even know yet why she called herself Mortenhoe.

A note from Vincent was waiting on my desk when I got in: he wanted to see me soonest.

"I got news for you, Roddie." He handed me a bundle of stills. "Things are moving nicely. . . . The silly girl went on an outing and our friends nabbed her. They'd have had her cold if they'd kept their nerves."

The stills showed a riot of some kind: angry faces, the familiar ugliness. I looked closer. "You say she got away?"

"She screamed. Would you believe it? She made a fuss and they let her go. If they were mine they'd be looking for jobs as of now."

"Made a fuss? That doesn't sound like Katherine Mortenhoe."

"A put-on, I'd say. Utterly calculated. You've got to hand it to her."

One of the pictures was a close-up of Harry. His wife stood behind him, caught by the camera with her face screwed up as if expecting to be struck. In another she had her mouth wide open, horribly unattractive. Her eyes were cold—possibly she was screaming. And in another I could clearly see a trail of saliva down her chin, and her hand possibly on its way to wipe it off.

"Even so," Vincent said encouragingly, "I understand it was pretty nasty."

I gave him back the photographs. Katherine Mortenhoe and her tormentors were indistinguishable.

Late in the afternoon more personal delivery letters arrived at the flat, a different postman, but equally avid. Harry dealt with him, disappointing him, and brought the letters through to the living room where Katherine was watching the third regional rebroadcast of the scene outside the Castle. Ingenious editing kept her off the screen in compliance with her Private Grief order, and the sound track fluffed over her screams. With each replay the item concerned her less: the attractive, forty-four-year-old Mrs. Mortenhoe of the announcers was not she, neither was the aggressively sturdy Mr. Blount her own poor frightened Harry. They were crea-

tures with only a tape reality. They were part of the image machine. Even the names were unrecognizable in the microphonic mouths of the reporters.

Harry opened the first of the letters. It was from a group of spiritualists. "They want to make an appointment with you six weeks from now," he said.

She wondered why he told her these things. Perhaps, like the news item, they made the present less real, and therefore the future. It was a feeling that could be allowed to grow, and it was dangerous. Once, long ago, two days ago, the choices had been simple: to fill her days with living, to write her book, to do her duty by Peregrine, or to go for dignity instead. Now she had to fight, if it was worth fighting, even to remain in touch with what her choices might be. She could, if she wanted, lose herself in the image machine.

Harry's attention was attracted by a yellow telegram envelope halfway down the bundle. He pulled it out, opened it, read it, and passed it to her.

DISGUSTED BY COVERAGE OF CASTLE INCIDENT STOP ASHAMED OF COLLEAGUES UNPROFESSIONAL BEHAVIOR STOP RENEW OFFER OF FULLEST PROTECTION SOONEST STOP FERRIMAN.

She read the message twice, then the small print on the back of the form, the time of acceptance, the stamp of the receiving office, the limitation of liability in the event of nondelivery.

"How much did this man offer you, Harry?"

This time he didn't prevaricate. "Three hundred thousand pounds."

The words mingled in her head with the equally improbable TV noises. She reached out and turned off the set. "Mr. Mathiesson said seven."

"I expect he was making a wild guess. Vincent said three. He put it in writing."

"Did he now?" She'd always thought there was more to Harry than met the eye. "And the piece of paper you sort of signed?"

"What d'you mean?"

"Come along, Harry. You agreed to let him know if we left town. Surely he didn't expect you to do that for nothing?"

". . . I took the money for us, Kate. There were no other strings—just a thousand pounds to help us get away at once."

He twitched, and dropped his bundle of remaining letters and didn't like to stoop to pick them up.

"I know it was silly. Thoughtless. Not . . . worthy. I just didn't think at the time how upset you'd be."

She turned away, not able to watch him grovel. The horribleness of these conversations with Harry was entirely her fault. She made him something he didn't need to be. The conversations were bad for them both, and likely to get worse, and should be stopped as soon as possible. Their need for each other was devious, and anyway no excuse. Its denial would bring them both a painful sort of freedom.

"I was only upset that first afternoon," she said. "Since then I've been thinking about your Vincent's offer very carefully. All in all, I think it has a great deal to recommend it."

"You do?"

Dear Harry—perhaps there were limits even to *his* credulity. "Well no. Not really. But now that this afternoon has shown us just what can happen, I don't see that we have any alternative."

Lying to him bothered her. But he would never agree to what she was planning, would never admit the relief it would bring. And anyway, she was going to have to do without the luxury of superficial truthfulness on many of the twenty-five days that remained. If she wanted really to live, she was going to have to fight. So she got up, and went to him, and bent to help him pick up his letters (they were his letters now, whatever was on the envelopes), and said, "I'll go and see Vincent Ferriman in the morning. On my own, Harry, while I've still got some of my Private Grief time left."

She glided, pleased with herself, her decision, out of the room. He watched her go, and absently put the remaining letters behind the clock on the mantelpiece, and wondered what the hell she was up to. She was as changeable as a weathercock, but he supposed it was only to be expected. Later, when she was rummaging in her handbag for the NTV letter, he nearly told her about the miniature transmitter (for her own protection) that Vincent had got him to

slide in under the lining. But in the end he didn't, for you could never be quite sure of the sort of thing that would make her fly off the handle.

And down in the street it was change-of-watch time for the man in the gray-green jacket. He handed his tiny bleep receiver over to his relief, and gratefully sloped off home. The relief settled down in his motorcar for a long and boring night.

FOUR *Friday*

I first heard of the kidnapping of Katherine Mortenhoe on the all-night telly in the Night Hawk's coffee bar. At three in the morning you find yourself watching anything, even the Tokyo Stock Market slotted into fifth reruns of your own shows. You watch too much, and you drink too much coffee, and you eat too many doughnuts. It's funny how hungry you can feel, even at that dead, overlit, hopeless hour. A few years of being the man with the TV eyes and I wouldn't be able to see out of them for fat.

The Mortenhoe flash woke up even the joe behind the counter. I asked if I could use his phone, and rang Vincent, but he'd wisely turned off for the night and I only got his answering service. I thought of going around to her place, but since she was no longer there, there didn't seem to be much point. Besides, half the media world was there already, and the other half on its way.

The flashes came through at fifteen-minute intervals. She'd been snatched as a hostage by a group of university students demanding the immediate release of a hundred and twelve of their fellows at present awaiting trial on charges of insurrection. They'd been waiting now for nineteen months. Like most people, I'd forgotten the case. Now that they'd made their point, I thought, maybe they'd bring her back. Or dump her. She was, I thought, drunk as I was on coffee and doughnuts, too young to die. Twenty-five days too young.

A quarter of an hour later the police had the students' car in sight. An arrest was expected at any minute. "That's quick," I said to the joe.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Computers," he said, as if that explained everything and without computers he'd have been a master of crime himself.

The commercials were next, then a talk show called Owl People. The link man was elderly, and obviously on speed. A tramp wandered in to the coffee bar, blowing from the cold and flapping his arms. "Let's see your fucking money," the joe said, and the tramp wandered out again.

I hurried after him, wanting to give him fifty, a hundred pounds, anything to make that joe look small, but he'd disappeared. By the time I got back—and Christ, it can be cold at three A.M. even in spring—the police had cornered the students up in the north of the city and there was talk of guns. That was all Katherine Mortenhoe needed: an early morning bullet behind the ear in some garish tower suburb. That way we'd all (she also?) be spared a great deal of trouble. And never get to know the answers to a lot of our questions. And never—just possibly—get a lift out of a dying fellow-creature's possibility of joy.

Even without Owl People the next fifteen minutes would have been long. With it they were interminable. The speedy link man hit a reaction, and let his guest tell four long bad jokes in a row. After that even the commercials were cute. Sitting by the chattering telly in that garbage dump of a coffee bar, it seemed to me infinitely worse that Katherine Mortenhoe, whom I had never met, should be denied a mere few weeks than that forty years of life should be taken from some other normal, healthy parson. Unless of course that other normal, healthy person should happen to be me.

All right, so I was being flip. No doubt I was afraid of being anything else. If I need an excuse, well, it was nearly four A.M. and the new drugs were marvelous, weren't they, *weren't they?*

So the fifteen minutes passed, and the next news flash had Katherine safe and sound, already on her way to a hospital, suffering from nothing worse than shock. The students, once surrounded, had bleakly decided against yet another "students' last stand" and had chosen instead to live. And to fight another day. So they'd given themselves—and Katherine Mortenhoe—up, only one of them being shot actually to death in the process. Even so, the another day's fight of the remaining three was likely to be delayed for around twenty-five years (with good behavior).

The whole episode therefore, as far as it concerned Katherine, was over in little under an hour. It was trivial, only briefly exciting, and not really worth having detailed, except

that it gave her possibly her final nudge into Vincent's arms. At least, that was how I saw it at the time. Its opportuneness told me two things: first, that Vincent knew his job (which I was already aware of), and second, that Vincent was in a hurry. He must be feeling, I decided, that Katherine Mortenhoe's days were slipping away through his fingers like sand.

I was glad there was no one around to tell those students whose cause they were really going to rot their youth away in jail for. Only me, and I wasn't that sadistic.

Katherine had hated the students, grotesque in their moment of glorious revolution. Among themselves they spoke an intentionally incomprehensible guerrilla slang, emphasizing their separation from past and present and future. They even wore a sort of uniform, the necessary tattered flak-jacket. And Guevara dead and you'd have thought buried these many years. She despised their thinking, which was no more than feeling. It gave them an uncaring freedom. When there was nothing to do, you did something. You short-circuited forty million years. She despised them, and even found them slightly shocking.

For their part, the students resented her, and treated her as a commodity. And they put the blame on her when the police appeared on their tail not three minutes after getting away from her block. They accused her, ridiculously, of having someone to watch her flat—as if her fucking life were so fucking precious. In jail men and women died every day of the year, young men and women, brave men and women—what right had she to think herself so fucking special?

It wasn't worth telling them that their premises were wrong or, worse still, unimportant. Their words, like their lives, were rhetorical, a gesture that undoubtedly something at some time had made necessary. Katherine saved her energy for holding on to the back of the seat in front as the car skidded through the deserted city. They would have spat her pity back at her.

Then the hump of a roundabout had loomed improbably, impossibly, in front of them, its massed flowerbeds colorless in their searing headlights, and the car had mounted it, and turned over, and stopped. She realized suddenly that she might, at any time since her abduction, have been killed.

And recognized, as she lost consciousness, the heavy, childhood scent of wallflowers.

She woke to a rigor. Dr. Mason was standing by her bed, watching her pulse and respiration on the screen, and it was some seconds before she worked out why she shouldn't be glad to see him. Then Vincent's letter came to her, and his sincerity over the telephone, "So many people involved, Mrs. Mortenhoe . . . A leak is possible at so many levels. . . . ," and the whole affair was suddenly terribly long ago and unimportant, and she needed Dr. Mason as her only way in through the professional carapace.

He saw she had opened her eyes, and smiled at her. "You bumped your head," he said. "Not even very hard. You're fine."

"And those silly students?"

He frowned. "When you get these rigors, Katherine, you should try to relax. If you do they'll take less out of you. Try breathing deeply."

She tried breathing deeply. The rigor eased. She didn't repeat her question—if he wanted to spare her unpleasantness she'd let him. The students had never managed to be particularly real to her, more like actors in a bad film. And she'd read about how they filmed all those bullet wounds: they stopped the camera and painted them on.

"I wrote to you," Dr. Mason said. "Special Delivery. I wanted to keep in touch."

She remembered the remains of Harry's bundle of letters. "I got so much mail," she simplified, "in the end I just stopped opening it."

"I was afraid of that. I had no other means of contact."

"You've got contact now," she said, and turned over, and went to sleep.

When she woke properly it was midmorning. Dr. Mason was back, or had been there all the time. "You're getting up," he said. "Can't have you lying there feeling sorry for yourself. Harry called and I told him you were fine. He wanted to come over but I said you'd be home after lunch."

She remembered Harry. "He's not very good at hospitals," she said.

"That's what I thought. Well now, breakfast first, and then we're getting you up."

Over breakfast he asked her about her paralysis up in the Castle, and she told him what she could. He was fascinated.

So much so that she almost wished she could have another one there and then, just to oblige. But it wouldn't quite come.

Then he changed the subject. "You're keeping cheerful?" he said.

She couldn't quite believe the question. "Cheerful?" she repeated.

"It's very important. I can easily give you some cheerers if you're not."

"I haven't really thought about it."

"Of course not." He hesitated. "I sometimes underestimate you, Katherine. I'm sorry."

She finished her breakfast in silence. If he was going to fail her like that he could go away. Come to that, why was he there at all, he with his closely stacked appointments at the Medical Center?

"I suppose I'm a very interesting case." She brushed toast crumbs off the sheet. "I suppose you'll do a paper and you're here to take notes."

"Not altogether." So he didn't deny it. "I'm also here because I think I can help."

"You told me nothing would help."

"With the progress of the syndrome, no. With your attitude to its progress, yes."

Her attitude was nobody's business but her own. "My attitude at the moment is that I want to go home to my husband. Later I may look in on Computabook to tidy a few things up." She didn't mention what she intended to do in between. "I've got a lot to get through before my three days of Private Grief run out."

He was restless. She guessed he must have something difficult to say, for he distanced himself by wandering away to the nurses' table and sitting down. "I . . . don't want you to feel your condition is a trap, Katherine. And I must advise you against taking on any binding agreements concerning it." Did he suspect the left out, the most important item? "You see, no condition is a trap. There are always ways out, and I wouldn't be doing my duty if I didn't tell you of them."

"Euthanasia?"

In the pause that followed he took his ball-point out of his pocket, pressed it against the table and slid his thumb and forefinger down it. Then he turned it the other way up

and slid his thumb and forefinger down it again. It skidded unpleasantly on the table's surface.

"Never," he said, "under any circumstances whatsoever. I like my patients to be able to trust me. Completely." He looked up. "Besides, the conditions under which it was once arguable no longer arise."

"Cheerers, cheerers, and more cheerers," she said, not quite sure why the idea repelled her.

"Don't dismiss them too easily, Katherine. If there's one thing a doctor learns it's that there's nothing inherently noble about suffering." He put his ball-point away. "I want you to get dressed now, Katherine, and come with me. Before you dismiss the euphoria-producing drugs I would like you to see them in action."

She shied away, drawing the bedclothes up to her neck. "No."

"You must. Your decision will have no dignity if it's based merely on ignorance and fear."

She didn't care a bugger whether her decision had dignity or not. Pompous word-making. Dignity was no more than a weapon in the armory of the will to power—when the time came she'd no doubt she would grovel with the rest. . . . To be accused of ignorance and fear, however, was another matter.

"All right," she said. "Just give me five minutes to put my face on."

The hospital Katherine had been taken to had a large Retirement Wing. According to Dr. Mason at any one time there would be over a thousand men and women in Retirement there. The euphemism, for so long an accepted part of her vocabulary, was suddenly menacing. She began to sweat. The first Residence she was taken to was for the Absentminded. In one nice little room an old, old man was propped up in bed, staring at a jigsaw puzzle laid out on the table in front of him. While Katherine and the doctor were there a nurse came in and put two pieces into the corner of the jigsaw—blue sky and sea gulls. The old man smiled.

"A simple narcosis," Dr. Mason murmured. "He really believes he's doing it himself."

In another sun-filled room there was a double bed. Katherine wouldn't have been surprised if the wrinkled couple lying in it had both been men, or both been women, but it turned out that they were a married couple now on their

eighth renewal. "They're lucky," Dr. Mason said, "to have become Absentminded more or less together."

Occasionally the bed gave a little electric jiggle, and the couple squeaked faintly, possibly with pleasure. "Of course, they sleep a lot as well," said Dr. Mason.

Farther down the corridor they came to a room with several beds in it, and a continuous high twittering of wordless speech. "For some people," Dr. Mason said, "communication is the important thing."

Katherine closed the door and leaned on it. "Is all this supposed to encourage me not to feel trapped?" she said.

Dr. Mason shook his head. "You'll never be like these. Absentmindedness only comes with extreme old age. Perhaps we should have started with cases that were more applicable." He walked away and, afraid to be left, she followed him. "All the same, your reaction interests me. Every one of these patients is happy, busy, and—as far as their concentration permits—interested. Would you rather we left them to empty vegetation?"

Yes. Yes, she would rather they had left the patients to empty vegetation. But she couldn't say so. She couldn't justify. She could only feel. They went up in the elevator to the third floor, to cases that were more applicable.

People up here were mobile, and alert. They knew Dr. Mason and greeted him cheerfully, then turned back to their bridge or chess or newspapers or knitting parties or coffee with their friends. If their legs no longer worked they had trollies, if their arms were withered they had prosthenes, if their digestions had fallen to pieces they were fed by alternative means. If one of them fell down, or wet the floor, nobody except the nurses seemed to notice. They were all, as far as Katherine could tell, happy. It was a Happy Place.

By way of demonstration Dr. Mason spoke to a dwindled old man with paralyzed hips. "You there, Charlie, come and tell the lady what the hell you've got to be so cheerful about."

Charlie roared with laughter. "Never had it so good, Doc."

"That's nonsense. Your legs don't work, your heart's bad, and you might pop off at any minute. Your family doesn't come to see you, and you're trapped in here for the rest of your days."

"He's trying to put me off." Charlie maneuvered his trolly till he could nudge Katherine. "The way I look at it, dearie, is like this. It's a good life, all right, but nothing goes on

forever. This here's a sort of halfway place, where we can make up for things. The one place where it's all love."

He spoke neither mawkishly, nor with embarrassment. "If it's took pills," he said, "to show me life ain't all rotten, then give me pills every time."

Dr. Mason spun his trolly around to face him. "Doesn't that make pills an awfully easy way out?" he said harshly.

"Not an easy way *out*, Doc. An easy way *in*. It's how you look at it. Anyway, what's so wrong with things being easy?"

"Some people might say the easy things weren't worth having."

"Like sunsets, I reckon. Or a good sexy song." Charlie laughed again, and turned back to Katherine. "Them religions had to prop up the old ways. Life was hard, life was brutal. Don't you believe a word of it."

Dr. Mason thanked him, and led Katherine away, out into the corridor, down in the elevator. "You see, they're not in the least sedated," he said. "Not in the old sense. Mood control has come a long way since the old bromide."

Katherine stared at him, angrier than she even understood. "Like a seal with its trainer," she said. "Clap, clap, bounce the ball. . . . And you still think showing me all this will make me want to come here?"

"You had to know exactly what it was you were rejecting. And why you were rejecting it."

The elevator arrived at the ground floor. She stumbled out, needing to escape, then turned. She wasn't quite finished with him. He had no right. Most of all, he had no right to demand reasons. "I honestly think I'd rather join a row of dribbling idiots than the chemical camaraderie of that lot up there."

"I can find you some dribblers, if that's what you want."

She nearly struck him. "You laugh at me, and you laugh at them. You're not fit to be a doctor."

His face stilled and he looked away, far more hurt than she would have expected. "Whatever else my failings may be, I can promise you that I find neither you nor the afflictions of the old in the least amusing."

It was a ridiculous conversation. People pushed past them, got into the elevator. He seemed totally unaware. "Obviously you will want another doctor. I believe you saw Dr. Clarke a couple of times. If you need any help, phone the Center

and they'll put you through to him. I'll make sure he receives your documents. And good luck."

He bowed very slightly, and left her. She wanted to protest: she hadn't meant it. She didn't want Dr. Clarke, she wanted *him*. He knew her. He understood her. He was her only way in through the professional carapace. And yet, knowing her he had brought her to this terrible building, and the people he had shown her frightened her more than death itself.

She watched him walk away across the crowded foyer. She would never see his Dr. Clarke. Wherever she was, whatever happened to her, she now had no one to turn to. Which was, after all, the historic animal condition. She pulled herself together and walked out of the hospital, out into the sunny late morning of her twenty-fourth remaining day. If she hurried she might get to Vincent Ferriman before lunch.

The next on my list of people who I reckoned would help me to understand the only true and continuous Katherine Mortenhoe was the man she worked with at Computabook. I arrived at his office around ten, when I could be sure that Katherine would still be hospitalized and not liable to come barging in. Vincent had warned me he was still keeping me very much in reserve as far as she was concerned. I'd finally got through to him while he was having his breakfast: I had questions I wanted to ask about the poor bloody students. He fielded the questions so neatly that he might in fact not have been fielding them at all. Except that from what I knew of him, the better he fielded the more he had to field.

Katherine's Peter was a disappointment. Either he liked her very much, and so wasn't telling, or he disliked me very much, and so wasn't telling. He said she came to work early and went home late. She was a thoughtful boss, he said. She didn't despise her work, but she didn't overrevere it either. She kept a sense of proportion in all things. . . . Well, no, he said, perhaps she didn't have all that much of a sense of humor. The woman he described was nobody, certainly not Katherine Mortenhoe.

Maybe I wasn't his type. Some fags went for me, others didn't. Either way, there were many things I'd do for NTV, but that had never been one of them.

I tried a different line. "Did she ever talk to you about her first husband?" I asked.

"Should she have?"

"Come on. He must have been important to her. After all, she kept his name even after her second marriage."

"Perhaps she liked it. It's a nice word. Words mean a lot to her."

I doubted if it was as simple as that. "Then she never mentioned him?"

"If I said *never,* then you'd go away and make something of it. Of course she mentioned him. But she never confided, not about him or about anything else. We worked together, that's all."

They'd worked together for three years, which is a long time in these progressive days. Was she really such a private person? "So she mentioned him. What did she say?"

He looked at me sideways. "I tell you one thing," he said, "she was wasted here on these romances."

"Was that what her first husband said?"

"He couldn't know. He was one of those ugly men, all chin and rugged good sense." So she hadn't confided, merely shown him a photograph. "He couldn't know *anything*. Even I didn't know till a couple of days ago."

I waited, sort of neutral. If he'd decided to tell me something, he would. "She could've been a great writer," he said. "A really great writer."

"You can't mean those novels she did while she was still at college."

He shook his head. "This was very recent. I've been going over her notes. She was on to something really big. If you media men hadn't got at her she'd have done something fantastic. A totally new approach to computer fiction."

He must have caught my expression. "All right, so computer fiction isn't all that it might be. But you only get out what you put in. And she knew she had so little time. . . . What she was putting in was great—the book would have been real, and all hers. Huge. Savage. Angry."

He was terribly excited. He might have been talking about his favorite man, but hardly about the work of the Katherine Mortenhoe I thought I knew. "Could I see these notes?" I said.

"You're welcome. But they won't mean much. Rebuilt

associations, situations freed, word-stores relinked—you need training for that sort of thing."

I allowed him his little victory. Which was big of me, seeing I'd no alternative. "So?" I said, cool like.

"So I'm going to work on it. It could be great. I always knew there was more to her than she let show. If there's enough to give me her intentions, I'll finish it. The testament of a tomorrow person. Wow."

Wow indeed. Of course, I'd always imagined (silly me) that tomorrow people would somehow be calm and compassionate and all-wise—if they were going to be huge and savage and angry I didn't see they'd be much of an improvement on today people. But I thanked her Peter for the tip. As guardian of her greatness he needed all the encouragement he could get.

Obviously my next call had to be on Gerald Mortenhoe. Apart from anything else, the business of the name still niggled at me. Certainly it was a nice word: but old-fashioned Harry would hardly have agreed to it without a fight. And in those early, romantic, new-beginning days, would a fight have been worth it, simply for the sake of a nice word? A word that linked her to an ugly man, all chin and rugged good sense?

Katherine was a puzzle. I'd seldom come across anybody with so few contacts, so few friends, so little family. After Gerald there was nobody. Except Harry, and I'd have to wait on him till we were formally introduced. Vincent's hack scouts had even been around to her Residential Block and drawn a blank on hello-across-the-hallway acquaintances. Harry had his Hobby Room rivals, but Katherine had nobody. And according to her case history she didn't even have b.o.

The day was still sunny, so I decided to drive the eighty-odd miles out of the city to Gerald Mortenhoe's school, top down, feeling big and shiny. My car was sharp, and very expensive, part of the new rich life I hadn't quite grown used to. I drove out through the streets of the inner city slowly, catching the cool reflection in shop windows whenever I could. People turned their heads, and I felt for once not gray with three months' sleeplessness (the drugs were wonderful, weren't they, *weren't they?*), but young and vivid. Incognito behind my hirsute fur-suit, but somebody all the same. Somebody.

If I'd been less of a Somebody the marchers might have let me through.

I came on them first as I tried to cross the southern Ring Road. I was fifth in a queue of cars, and they let the first four over. Me they decided they didn't like. I didn't altogether blame them—in that car I had to be someone high up either in business or government or the trade unions. Or —worst of all from their anti-pap point of view—a commercial entertainer. So they sat down on the road in front of me and the police started hauling them away. More marchers were arriving all the time, of course, so that every time a space got emptied it was immediately filled again. Besides, arrests on that scale were impossible, so those hauled away would quietly pick themselves up and wander back to sit again. The police began to sweat, and to lose whatever cool they had ever possessed, and the truncheons came out, and the boots. Beyond the marchers I could see water cannon arriving.

The scene was developing, and I just wasn't worth that sort of fuss. So I turned my swank-wagon and drove back the way I'd come. There wasn't even a cheer. Behind me the sitters simply got up and started walking again.

The next junction I tried was similarly blocked. And the next. And the next. Four abreast, quiet, with a placard to every fifth rank, the marchers passed the long hood of my car, shouting occasionally, tiredly, but mostly just hating silently as they trudged. Since the order forbidding marches in the center precincts, the Civil Liberties people had sworn to lay a solid cordon around the entire city. A hundred miles of marchers, in orderly fours. And nobody had believed it possible. We lived with marches much as we lived with winter rain. They were inconvenient, even debilitating, but never downright impossible to cope with.

Now however, as I watched the weary, varied, relentless procession stretching as far as I could see in either direction along the bright suburban streets, always changing but always the same, I wondered. A hundred miles of marchers was no longer vulgar rhetoric. It was people.

At the next blocked junction I saw an NTV camera team at work. I sighed. If I'd told Vincent I was coming out this way he could have saved a lot of company money. I turned the car yet again and worked my way farther westward. By now I was angry, otherwise I'd have gone back to base

and borrowed a small gray car from the pool—though even these were not always getting through if the marchers didn't like the drivers' faces. It was a ridiculous situation. Whatever the particular grievance—I'd long ago lost count—it didn't justify this sort of petty, arbitrary tyranny.

At this, my sixth attempt to get out of the city, I decided to stand no further nonsense. I was no manipulator (oppressor had long ago been replaced in their limited invective), I had even sometimes in the past been on their side: if they wanted to get their ribs kicked in on my account, that was their affair. I tucked the car close in behind a milk truck that was bound to be let through, and pressed on. If they tried to get in between me and it they'd have to get out again pretty damn sharp.

I set out the reasoning of the previous paragraph with no comment. It was easy to arrive at and impossible afterward to forget. Given this reasoning it was right and proper, almost inevitable, that I should run the big front wheels of my car over two of the marchers before I could stop. If they wanted to get their lives crushed out on my account, that was their affair.

I sat very still in the curious shuffling silence of possibly a thousand feet. The man under my car (he was elderly, if that makes it better or worse) began to groan. The woman under the other wing pressing was quite quiet. On my own behalf let it be said that I was not so much afraid of the marchers as horrified, too little and too late, at what I had done.

Looking back on it, I know that the silence, and then the groaning in the silence, must have existed only in my mind. Where it exists still. For surely those sitting in the road, those crowding in front of me, those whom I did not run over, must have made some instant objection? But it is still the shuffling silence, and then the groaning, that remain with me far more vividly than the anger that followed. They tore at the car, at me. They screamed and pounded. It was blank stupidity, not a wish for expiation, that stopped me raising the windows, erecting the hood. I gained the impression that one of the men tearing at me was the dead woman's son.

After the interminable length of the silence which never happened, it seemed no time at all before I was rescued by the police. Time to think briefly of Vincent's investment and the insurance that would cover it, and of how I would ever

face Tracey and Roddie Two if I survived, and then the police were beating away the hands, and the placard poles, and the devouring faces. The first policeman to reach me glared as wildly as any of those he was beating away. "Bastard," he shouted. "Murdering bastard."

The car door was already open, and he dragged me out onto the ground. The marchers stood back, watching him kick me. It was they who were kicking me, kicking him even, for all the kicking they had ever received. I curled up tight, protecting my balls, my belly, my eyes. I was possibly two feet away from the body of the woman I had killed. For some reason the toe of the policeman's boot hardly hurt. Then other policemen arrived, and hauled me to my feet. Under cover of my shouting and swearing one of them got his punch-happy face down to my ear. "You can forget Judge's fucking Rules," he told me, "if you want us to get you out of this alive."

As they manhandled me away, wrenching my arm behind my back and kicking me as they went, I'll swear the man under my car was still groaning, unnoticed by his avengers. He groans still, when my night is particularly dark.

The police had set up their mobile headquarters van in a side street. They tossed me in, and slammed the door. There was a gray steel desk, and behind it a control panel with switches, four closed-circuit TV screens, and a pornographic calendar. On one of the screens I recognized my car, on its side now, its radiator kicked in. It was suddenly very quiet, apart from a walkie-talkie's turned-down croaking. Outside I heard distantly the siren of an approaching ambulance. I was helped to my feet.

"May I see your wallpaper, sir? Driving license, insurance certificate, mobility permit, civil offenses card? We have to be sure you exist."

The gray-faced, gray-natured police inspector was undoubtedly making a joke. I handed over my wallet and let him help himself. My face was bleeding in half a dozen places. I felt battered as much by the crowd's hatred as by their hands. The inspector sorted through my documents. "Ah yes. . . . Even with the beard, my sergeant thought he knew you. Quite a fan, I gather."

If he expected something, a professional simper, he didn't get it. I stood and stared at him, the fear and sweat on me cooling.

"Well now, sir, we can't have this, can we?"

He was entitled to ham, entitled to his fun. "May I sit down?" I asked.

He nodded to the sergeant, who left his control panel, came around the desk, and moved a chair, holding it for me like a waiter till I was comfortably settled.

"We can't have honest, celebrated citizens obstructed about their lawful occasions. Police College Handbook, part one, chapter one, page one."

He leaned down and got a bottle of vodka and two glasses from somewhere behind his desk. "A present from an admirer," he said, and half-filled both glasses. The last time I'd been to a cop movie there'd been this line, "Not now, thank you, sir. I'm on duty." The sergeant gave me one of the glasses, closed my fingers about it for me.

"Honestly," I said, "I never saw them. One minute I was close behind the milk truck. The next, I was . . ."

I ran out of confessional steam. The inspector emptied his glass and refilled it. "It happens to the best of us," he said. I sipped my own drink. Either he was being very funny indeed, or I didn't like the direction the interview was taking.

A red light flashed on the control board. The sergeant hurried back to it, put on earphones, and began giving quiet orders into a microphone. On one of the TV screens I could see an ambulance nudging through the crowd toward my car. "I ran over two people, Inspector. A man and a woman. The woman was dead. I'm sure of it."

"A complication, certainly. But they don't die easily, these people."

"A complication?"

"Inquest, coroner's report, you know the sort of thing. Nothing we can't handle, mind. But things would be easier without an actual mortality."

I drank my vodka. I've always hated vodka, but I drank it down. "A woman is dead," I said, "and a man is injured, possibly quite badly."

The inspector smiled sadly. *"Pour encourager les autres,"* he said. Evidently he knew some history. "We'll bring you to court, of course. But not for six months or so, and in a different part of the country. The world moves on—I don't imagine you'll have much trouble." He smiled again. "Frankly, my dear sir, you've done us all a great favor."

And I'd thought I was cynical. . . . "I could always insist on standing trial at once," I said.

"Wouldn't that be just a teeny bit vulgar? A discreet contribution to the inevitable fund would be far more realistic."

"Plus, no doubt, a discreet bottle of vodka in the right quarter."

He refused to be needled. "That's extraordinarily kind of you. But I'm only doing my duty."

"Your duty to the fat politicians."

"Some of the people's elected representatives are really quite thin."

You meet flip little crooks in all sorts of places. But they seldom win unless you want them to. This one was winning. "Supposing I was recognized?" I said, faltering ever so slightly.

"Deny it. We'll issue a name at once, to stop speculation. Anybody who thought they recognized you was simply mistaken. Not many people have my sergeant's way with faces."

"And the car? Anyone who checked its ownership from the registration number would—"

"Would make his inquiry via the police." He sat back. "It's a wicked old world," he said. "But I can't honestly see what will be gained by your making a martyr of yourself."

Nor, honestly, could I.

Just then a first aid orderly arrived to tidy up my face. Apart from a couple of bruises there was really very little damage. My ribs, likewise, were bruised but not broken. And as for the thrilling taped evidence of my eyes, I knew very well that Vincent would (regretfully) agree with the inspector that it could hardly be used.

Later an unmarked police van arrived and I was bundled into it, a jacket over my head. I could hear the inspector speaking to the inevitable group of reporters. ". . . Assisting us with our inquiries. That's right. No, his name is Barber. Christopher Barber, aged twenty-seven. One of these advertising whiz-kids. I'm sorry, no, I'm not divulging his home address. I know how persistent you gentlemen can be. Contact Area Office in the morning. Maybe they'll have something for you. . . ."

The police van moved away. Few of the reporters would bother. And I knew from experience that those who did would get little joy. Barber was a common enough name.

And the Advertising Association had no official registry. And the world moves on.

The girl on reception at NTV House recognized her at once and paged her straight up to Vincent Ferriman's office. On the way from the hospital she'd had one of her little paralyses, and fallen down in the street by an Anti-Surveillance Gadget shop. But she'd kept her face to the wall, and stayed anonymous, and nobody had bothered her. She couldn't see her watch to time the paralysis, but it had seemed to last about ten minutes. Then she'd got up, and dusted herself, and continued on to NTV House, hobbling slightly because of a bruised knee.

Vincent Ferriman was glad to see her, but didn't gush. He was solicitous, but didn't oppress. He sat her down, and sent for soup and sandwiches because her little paralysis had delayed her and she hadn't had any lunch. Then he settled himself behind his desk and in a fatherly fashion watched her eat. An Aimee Paladine fatherly fashion.

When he got down to business it was on a level that did not insult her intelligence. "You're here because you've nowhere else to go," he said. "You don't want to hear my rationale. You have already rejected emotionally anything that I could possibly say. You're here because the commercial world has left you no alternative."

It was a fair enough statement of the facts, but it didn't warm her to him. She kept on eating. She had seldom felt so hungry.

"It's not an ideal situation," he went on, "but at least it's workable. It's up to me to improve it as we go along. For the moment you're here, and that's enough."

She chewed. "I want the money now," she said. "And I think it should be more."

"More than what?"

"Last night's excitements have put up my value. Being kidnapped has made me a more valuable property."

"The jargon's right, Katherine, but I don't see—"

"I want more, Vincent, and I want it now."

Tough. Hard-boiled. Using his first name like an insult. But he didn't seem to notice. He spread his hands. "Looked at another way, Katherine, your market value is down, not up. A couple of days ago you had a choice in the matter. Today we've agreed you have none."

He had to go through the motions. "There's always Rocky Mountain Waffles," she said.

She'd hoped to baffle him, but he smiled, and even corrected her. "Rocky *Haven* Waffles. And their place is a dump."

"I don't mind. I'm not doing this for myself. I'm doing this for all the little terminals to come. Establishing a higher rate for the job. United we stand, divided we fall."

At this Vincent laughed aloud, and she knew he was disarmed. She finished the last corner of the last sandwich. The cheap joke, the outrageous demand, the vulgar aggression, had swamped his distrust. She would get what she was asking. She would get it for Harry's sake: the money in advance, safe in the bank, leaving her free to do as she had planned, to cheat the image machine in every way she could. For Harry's sake, the money in advance, so that they couldn't snatch it back whatever she did.

"Five hundred thousand," she said, "in advance. That means now."

Vincent laughed again. It wasn't, of course, his money. "We'll have to see Contracts. But they'll never advance you more than half, even on my say-so. Half a million is a lot of money, even for NTV."

She'd settle for half, if she had to. "I'll need at least four."

"Three."

"Three and a half."

"Be reasonable. Three's the whole original offer."

That was true. It was all Harry'd get, there'd be no second payment on completion, but he could hardly complain. Now she and Vincent were both laughing.

"I still say three and a half. I've only the one death to sell. Don't you feel bad, trying to knock me down?"

"And I still say three. I thought we were treating it as a strictly union matter."

"Three and a quarter."

"Three."

"You're a hard man." She stopped laughing. "But all right. Three it is."

It was all Harry'd get, but he could hardly complain. And NTV could sue someone who wasn't there, a nonperson, a dead person, all they liked. She stared at Vincent, watching his laughter cease as abruptly as hers had.

"I've a feeling I've been outwitted," he said. "But I'm far too nice a person to mind."

They went down a couple of floors to the Contracts Office. She read her amended contract carefully, not because she was interested, not because it mattered, but because she would be expected to. Then she signed, and the witnesses signed, and Vincent was all smiles, and she went across with him to Accounts where the sum of three hundred thousand pounds was registered into the central banking computer for hers and Harry's joint account. Five minutes later she rang her branch, just to confirm. The manager went away to check. When he returned his voice was hushed, both by the size of the desposit and by his sudden unworthy contact with the hem of Katherine Mortenhoe's garment.

Vincent rubbed his hands. "Now I'd like you to meet your series director. Roddie's something really rather special. He's not like me: he's got the makings of a conscience."

"Couldn't it wait?" She had a lot to do, and not long in which to do it. "Last night is catching up on me. And officially I've got another day of my Private Grief left."

"Only a social meeting, Katherine. I think you'll feel better once you've met him. And there's something he's got to explain. Something we've had up our sleeve just waiting for someone like you."

He reached for the telephone. "Besides, you slept in the hospital till nearly one, so you can't be feeling all that tired."

He knew altogether too much about her. He and Dr. Mason must have a hot line. She considered doing a Gordon's Syndrome on him just to be awkward, but it seemed a sort of sin. . . . Her series director, he had said. It was a nice thought: dying really did need a series director. But this Roddie was a luxury she'd just have to do without.

After a great deal of telephoning—a circumspect call to Gerald for example, to her first husband (she might have known they'd be on to him)—Vincent finally traced her series director to some official-sounding place over on the far side of the city. His questions became even more circumspect, and he made notes of the answers secretively, smiling at her, charming her as he did so. Afterward he told her—very lightly—that Roddie was tied up on some official matter and mightn't be available until the following day. She wasn't curious, merely relieved. The following day was a problem to be solved as it happened.

She promised to deliver herself up to the protection of NTV at four the next afternoon, and got away as quickly as she could. She gained the impression that Vincent Ferriman suddenly had other things on his mind, and wasn't altogether sorry to see her go.

From NTV House she took a taxi, first to her bank and then on as far into the old dock area as the driver would go. Then she walked. She had seen the sort of shop she was looking for in a color magazine some fourteen months before. Fringies had been news in those days. Where she was going there'd be plenty of them.

The road she walked along was a huge truckway slashed across a mass of flashy last-generation housing and some little back-to-backs even older, its surface cracked and tufted with stringy grass. The article had said much of this housing was occupied, but she saw no signs of life and heard none. Above the road shredded decorations were strung between the huge tilted lamp standards: faces peeled from house-high posters, egg crates, a thousand plastic bottles, alloy balustrading, coils of brown and blue electric cable, silver foil pie plates, a string of enormous yellow wristwatches from some advertising campaign. Instant art. They twirled and chattered above her in the cool, bright air. On either side of them the chopped-off ends of the houses were dazzle-painted, and lettered with last year's slogans.

Ahead of her she saw the truckway partially blocked with a thirty-foot-high replica of an old-fashioned cash register made from rusty boiler plating. As she skirted it she realized it had once been used as a defensive position, with firing slits and a blast-shielded entrance. At the top of it someone had rung up an undergraduate *No Sale*. She reminded herself that once she too had been an undergraduate.

The truckway ended abruptly at a vast jumble of derelict trucks piled in front of the entrance to the old Container Depot. There seemed to be no way around. Children were playing in the trucks. When they saw Katherine approach doors slammed and they were suddenly very quiet. A tin can clattered onto the road in front of her and rolled a few feet. She stopped walking.

"Please may I come in?" she called.

There was a pause, and then a cheerful chorus of shouts and a few more tin cans. She noticed that none of them fell particularly near.

"See you next Tuesday," the children chanted. "See you next Tuesday."

Katherine waited for a gap. "Tuesday's a long way off. Mayn't I come in today?"

There were shrieks of laughter. One of the truck doors opened and a boy of fourteen or so climbed down a stairway of battered radiator grilles.. He came toward her, then stopped a few yards away. His head was shaved like that of a Sioux.

"It's a dirty insult," he said, his voice surprisingly pleasant. "See you next Tuesday—it's a dirty insult. The initials make a dirty insult."

Katherine worked it out. "I don't think that's an insult." He was almost as tall as she was. "Most men love cunts best of all. So how's that an insult?"

"It just is."

"All right—see you next Tuesday too, then. With knobs on. Now may I come in?"

He laughed. "You don't know how."

"Will you show me please?"

He hesitated. "I don't mind."

She followed him to the big double doors of a derelict container. Behind them at the far end of the container was a short tunnel through the remaining piled vehicles, and beyond that the vast open truck park of the Depot.

"We don't mind you knowing," he said. "Lots of people know. They still can't get in if we don't want them to."

He ran back to his gang, and they started up their chant again.

Inside the high wall of the Depot her arrival was noticed, but only mildly. On her way across the truck park to the terminal building she passed many groups of Fringe People, talking, or playing a complicated throwing game on the marked-out asphalt, or just sitting. They appeared to find their permanent leisure not in the least troublesome. Usually they looked up as she passed, and offered their embarrassingly pious greeting. "Care," they said, and smiled, and made signs. "Care . . ." It wasn't as if they were all of them young—you expected piety in the young. Many of them were as old as she, or older. But at least the media hadn't penetrated their rarefied lives, so that her presence, the PG sticket on her lapel, gave them no salacious thrill.

Overhead thousands of sea gulls screamed and circled.

They were a new breed, pi-dogs, scavengers of the new society. If you'd offered them a live fish most of them wouldn't have known what to do with it. In their own way the fringies were equally new.

The Container Terminal had once been a combined railhead, cargo dock, and truck loading center. Now the vast area under its roof was divided up into streets and little open spaces crowded with stalls like an eastern bazaar. A thousand conflicting musaks helped the illusion. Owing to the lack of rain inside the terminal all sorts of unusual building materials could be used: one "house" Katherine saw was built entirely of white expanded polystyrene blocks that had once contained transistor radios from Sweden. Another, mustier, was made of books, many from Peregrine. The air in the narrow streets was heavy with the smell of joss sticks that didn't altogether cover other even less desirable scents.

Katherine wandered for some minutes, unable to find the sort of shop she needed. She felt absurdly self-conscious in her city clothes. Nobody questioned her or offered to help, but people watched her go by with an interested openness that she found threatening. They seemed so agreeable to the possibility of communication, and to have so much time for it, that she shrank away. *Preserve me from having a rigor now,* she thought. *They'll be bound to touch me, intrude, put all their repulsive caring into practice.*

Suddenly, mercifully, she came on a whole street of the shops she wanted. Clothing shops for her planned disguise. She stopped at the first, hardly more than a stall, with a candy-striped awning and a stock that to her eye looked like a combination of old rummage and Hong Kong imitations of old rummage. The fat young woman beside it—sitting on a kicked-in guitar loudspeaker—was dressed in the uniform of a New York policeman.

"Klutzy clothes?" she asked. "You want klutzy clothes?"

Katherine knew she was being played for a tourist. It was an insult worse than "See you next Tuesday."

"I can think of nothing more horrible," she said stiffly, and then heard herself, and tried to smile. "You see, I need things that'll last more than a day or two. I'm hoping to change camps. If you'll have me."

"If you don't fit you won't stay. It's as simple as that."

Katherine had no intention of fitting. Or of staying. What she needed was a disguise that would last out her time.

Klutzy clothes were what tourists brought back and wore to parties.

She chose a reddish-brown robe belted with a long plait of soft Oriental hair, an under-robe of quilted terilene, and a hooded ski-troops survival jacket. Glengarry golfing socks, clogs, sun-goggles, and a necklace of sharpened steel disks (for tight corners, the fat young woman said), completed her outfit.

Other stall-holders gathered around to give advice. Her hair would give her away until it had grown, they said, and hiding it under the ski hood would be uncomfortable if the warm weather kept up. So she added a yellow plastic sou'wester. She'd need a sleeping bag, they said, so she chose one that zipped around and doubled as a holdall. . . . The bill came to nearly a hundred and fifty pounds.

"That's ridiculous."

The fat young woman crossed her hands piously over her uniformed breasts. "Changing camps is never cheap," she said.

"But you believe money isn't important."

"But you're the one who's paying. And you believe it is."

"So?"

"Gesture of solidarity."

"Barefaced extortion."

The fat young woman lowered her hands, hooked her thumbs in her leather belt. "We're on Benefit. You're on salary."

"Not anymore, I'm not."

"We bleed for you."

The crowd around them laughed. The stranger's bulging handbag obviously contained enough, and more, or she wouldn't be holding it so tightly against her stomach. Katherine suddenly wondered why she was humiliating herself in front of these people. Harry would hardly grudge her one fifty out of his three hundred thousand.

She paid with no further argument. The crowd applauded with friendly irony. She packed her new purchases into the sleeping bag holdall and started to walk away. After she had gone perhaps ten paces the fat young woman in the policeman's uniform called after her and, unwisely, she looked back. She saw the young woman peel a few notes off the bundle she had given her and put them in her pocket. The rest she fanned out in one hand. "We have been visited," she shouted, and tossed the bank notes into the air.

Nobody scrambled. They stood silently watching, and if a note fluttered within reach they caught it. There was a ritual quality about their action. Many notes blew away on an updraft over the shacks and gimmicky hovels for others to find.

Katherine turned angrily and strode away. The woman's gesture had been vulgar and pretentious. The whole place was vulgar and pretentious. She betted that once she was out of sight the people would be down on their knees, grubbing for her money on the littered, filthy concrete. Except that she knew she'd lose her bet.

Her departure was followed with the same polite interest as her arrival had been. Nobody molested her, or spoke to her other than occasionally to suggest that she should care. . . . And she did care. She cared very much. She cared furiously that society in its idleness should find it cheaper and easier to subsidize these thousands of freakish, self-indulgent misfits, rather than educate them to reality. It made her life of honest endeavor, and Harry's, suddenly pointless and quite unnecessary.

The children had gone from the truck dump. She let herself out through the double doors of the container and walked away down the desolate road. She was angry, and a rigor was gathering, and her anger was without justification. The connections in her mind were hers—not good or bad, noble or ignoble, simply hers. That she should be jealous of these vulgar, idle, pretentious, stupid, childish, immoral people was intolerable. . . . The walk back into taxi country was long. The tightness around her scalp increased, so that when she passed a parked car she thought of asking the man in it for a lift, at least as far as the nearest main thoroughfare. But she couldn't have borne to have a paralysis, or even a rigor, inside his tidy motorcar. Besides, he was asleep, his face hidden in the gray-green pillow of his jacket, folded up and tucked under his head. So she didn't look (don't look, dear) and walked on by.

The holdall was heavy, and she was thankful when she came to proper streets and could rest on it by the curb and wait. Once she had adopted her new persona taxis would decline to notice her. So she sat very straight and neat, with her knees together, a thoroughly respectable and industrious woman. The rigor, when it came, was mild, and she sat up straight and neat throughout it. When it had passed she

leaned sideways to unzip the holdall and get out her handbag. The tag of the zip was awkward. Concentrating, she discovered that the difficulty was more with her fingers. She saw the strange way they moved: they struck bluntly against each other and lost direction. Nevertheless, with patience and perseverance she was still able to make them open the zip and get out her handbag.

By the time a taxi came along this difficulty too had passed. Working the taxi door handle was easy, so delightfully easy. The driver never looked around, simply hunched in his seat and went where she asked him to, whistling off pitch in a way that normally would have made her want to scream. But she worked her hands, opening and shutting her handbag, and hardly even noticed. She went first to the central heliport where she squeezed her new holdall into a left luggage locker, and then hurried home to Harry. She owed him something. All the way from the heliport and then up in the elevator to their flat she tried to think what.

I was taken to police headquarters, my detention, they said, no more than a formality. They were nice enough, in a barbed sort of way, but they stuck to their formality. The magistrate who could authorize Christopher Barber's release on nominal bail was not available until the morning. It being a somewhat delicate matter they didn't like to bother the duty magistrate who might be less . . . sympathetic. Less bloody corrupt, I thought, and sighed for my own ingratitude.

To be locked in a cell can be pretty rough, even for the ordinary citizen who closes his eyes and shuts it all out, and even gets a bit of sleep maybe. But for me, refugeless, it was murder. I took my relaxants, my wonderful, wonderful sleep surrogates, and lay down on my bunk, and prepared for the long night. The ceiling of my cell, like the walls, was made of steel plates like the hull of an antique battleship, so I planned to pass the time by counting the rivets. I knew that if I kept this up for long enough my mind would move off somewhere else, leaving my eyes to tick mechanically to and fro, back and across. In that way a sort of dazzled unawareness would come, and even dreams. It took concentration, and often it didn't work, and mostly I didn't bother to try, but when I did try and it did come, it was like everything you've ever read about home. It was so gentle. It was where I belonged but could never stay.

I started the night not too badly, even optimistically. I had counted rivets for about half an hour and the edges of my mind were just beginning to soften, when they turned the lights off. I should have reckoned on this, of course: this wasn't a political jail: prisoners here were allowed their beauty, their sanity sleep. But in fact the sudden total darkness caught me unprepared. It was for a moment incomprehensible, an experience only dimly remembered, one that might signify anything: death, destruction, the coming of God. I lay stunned, unable to move, hearing in the new silence, the dark silence, hearing the blood beating in my ears. Then the two tiny pains started, and I made the connection, and remembered the flashlight left in the pocket of my overturned car.

Of course they came quite quickly when I pounded on the door. They were nice to me. When I told them of this terrible darkness phobia I had (dating from my childhood, Roddie Two's childhood), they turned the lights back on again. They weren't monsters. It wasn't as if I were a criminal—I'd done them all a favor, really. To calm me, they brought me news. The woman I'd thought I'd killed wasn't dead at all. She might even walk again, when (if?) she came out of her coma. And anyway, a Mr. Ferriman had been on the telephone. They were to tell me the contract we'd both been worrying about was all fixed. Also I wasn't to worry about the accident: I'd been on company business, so company insurance would settle, and handsomely. Already my car had been collected and repairs begun. . . . I could imagine the message, as Vincent gave it, being rather less crude. He respected my sensibilities. But its gist would have been the same.

So the light stayed on, and my night began again. And the safety of home had never been so distant.

Seven hours remained. I suppose seven hours do not seem all that terrible. Neither, really, do four hundred and twenty minutes. But I counted them, every one. And they're more than enough when all your life has is an ambition you've seen through, a hope you dare not examine, and a direction you'd rather not guess. They're enough to make possibilities of joy seem, to say the least, a bit ridiculous.

I was in a mood, of course. Earlier in the evening I'd wanted to talk to Tracey, just to talk to her, and the police had said no. They were taking no chances. It wasn't that they

doubted my discretion, but they were taking no chances. Probably they were right. There was nothing, at that moment, that I could say to Tracey or she to me. But the twenty-five thousand two hundred seconds they left me with were more than enough to make possibilities of joy seem, to say the least, a bit ridiculous.

FIVE *Saturday*

The first thing Katherine did on waking was to rouse Harry. To . . . rouse Harry. This, she had realized, was what she owed him. The fact that she was leaving him, for sound, complicated reasons that he'd never understand, demanded it. After she had gone, when his bewilderment and conventional pain were over, this would be what he'd remember. This, the sign and proof of her patient love, he would take with him, worth far more than any crude three hundred thousand pounds.

It would end their relationship as she wanted it to end (she had a literary background), not with a whimper but a bang.

At bedtime the previous evening, therefore, she had held him off, damped him down, invoked a headache she didn't have, and then lain awake listening to his gentle breathing till justice caught up with her and the headache became real. And other things besides . . . He'd slept soundly, however, and her goings-on hadn't disturbed him.

She wasn't going to tell him about the money, of course: he must find out about it later, when only he himself was around to see his confused reactions; when his guilty delight, his shameful golden dreams wouldn't matter. Instead, on the basis of their savings and Vincent's thousand pounds, they spent the evening sorting through a new batch of travel brochures. It didn't matter where they went, Harry said: Vincent had promised to provide protection and the necessary TV link anywhere in the world. Also he'd be using a mysterious new production technique: Katherine wasn't to worry—she'd hardly know the cameraman was there even.

She watched Harry carefully sorting the brochures into piles of probables, possibles, and hopelesses. She realized it must have been pretty comprehensive, that first brief inter-

view he'd had with Vincent Ferriman. Really quite remarkably comprehensive. Terms suggested, papers signed, money paid, protection promised, even production techniques discussed. . . . And then, only an hour later, hardly an hour later, when she had got back from the hospital— "What use is money?" he'd said. And—"The idea is obscene," he'd said. And—"I told him to get stuffed," he'd said.

With a check for one thousand of Vincent's pounds no doubt crisp in his pocket.

Yet it wasn't this that explained her decision to leave him. This was nothing new, nothing really new. It didn't alter her love for him. And it certainly made no difference to her sentimental determination that he should remember her ultimately and fondly for a shared, final, grand, and ceremonial fuck. (This was a determination that Ethel Pargeter —in different words, of course—would have understood very well indeed. And Ethel Pargeter's readers also, moist-eyed, with hot lumps in their throats.)

So the previous evening she had held him off, and now —at the right, the ceremonial moment—she roused him, stroking his morning hard-on, tweaking the few sad hairs on his chest. A wakening for him to remember, for him to remember when she was long ago and far away. . . . It would end their relationship, their real, wordless, skin-on-skin relationship, nobly, not with a whimper but a bang.

He lurched onto her. He was a slow waker.

"Fight it back, my honey," she whispered. "Press down. Remember? Press down with your diaphragm. Fight it back."

So he woke, and pressed down till he could press down no longer.

It was enough. It freed her of her mind. "Godgodgod," she cried. And (briefly) meant it.

Afterward she left him gasping and went to get breakfast. Today was her day for doing-not-brooding. Out of the kitchen window she saw that rain was falling, a fine gray, unspringlike drizzle. Also it turned out to be one of those occasions—they hadn't had one in weeks—when the electric appliances in her kitchen had died on her. A small bomb in some generating substation, no doubt, or a civil liberties saboteur on the staff of the central grid. She had no idea what they were after this time, and didn't care. She just wished the authorities would give them whatever it was, and let ordinary people get on with their lives—and deaths—

in peace. Meanwhile she cooked breakfast on her standby gas cooker that dirtied the bottoms of her pans. Neither the rain nor the inconvenience depressed her: today, Saturday, was her doing-not-brooding day. Brooding could, would, even should, come later.

They ate breakfast in bed. Life was one long holiday. They discussed their plans. She was glad Harry had lied to her: it made her own lies less troublesome. But it didn't, and she knew it didn't. Today, however, was her doing-not-brooding day. She sorted through the bundle of brochures.

"Capri?" she said. "If there's a square inch?"

"I rather thought the Bahamas."

"They're one big marina."

"There's always Pitcairn."

"At this time of year it's full of Germans."

"You're being provincial, Kate. Besides, everywhere's full of Germans."

"Except Germany. Germany's full of Americans."

"I don't see how it can be. After all—"

"A joke, Harry. Just a joke."

Harry sniffed, and shifted his legs under the bedclothes, and picked a brochure at random. "How about Tasmania?" he said.

He'd spoiled it. How naïve they were to be thinking always of islands. As if an escape, a refuge, existed anywhere. She took *Tasmania: Home of the Pacific Grand Prix* from him and looked at the pictures. "All right," she said. "We'll go there. At least it's a long way off."

"Are you sure? I mean, it's not very—"

"We'll go there, Harry."

The decision made, Harry immediately got in a fuss. What about the climate? What about clothes? What about currency? What about travel permits? What about—

"Ring Vincent," she said. "Tell him to fix it."

Harry was doubtful. "He's a very busy man."

"Like hell he is. As long as I'm alive he'll be busy doing what I say. That's what NTV pays him for."

"You used not to be such a hard person, Kate."

There were several answers to that one, but she let them all pass. Today was her doing-not-brooding day.

Prodded, Harry rang NTV House. He found Vincent as charming as ever, and helpful, and delighted with the

choice of locale. Tasmania was strong on filmic settings; the islanders—as yet unmedia-oriented—would be little trouble; the television facilities were excellent, on account of the annual Grand Prix. His assistant would make all arrangements, and the documentation would be ready for them to pick up when they came to NTV House at four. On the question of the clothes, though, he'd prefer Mrs. Mortenhoe to buy her own. Neither he nor his assistant would presume to choose clothes for a beautiful woman. Katherine, standing close to Harry, heard this.

"Beautiful Katherine Mortenhoe and her beautiful husband make a beautiful couple doing beautiful things in a beautiful world, while she prepares beautifully to die. It's all so beautiful. . . ."

But she didn't mind a shopping expedition. She made no precise plans for getting away from Harry: a dress shop would be as good a place as any.

They left the flat. She didn't look back. If she could leave Harry so easily, then of course she could leave these other bits and pieces of her life. Outside in the drizzle the newsstand screens were showing: *Record Price to Syndrome Victim + Blast Hits Power Station + NTV Signs Mortenhoe + Riots Chaos Flares in County Town + Ferriman on Is Dying a Dying Art?* + She hurried Harry on before he could buy a printout. She'd rather the news of his nest egg came later, when he needed comforting after the cancellation of his trip to Tasmania.

A reporter picked them up almost immediately, and then two more. She kept walking. Harry, out of breath but enjoying himself, gave them an interview on the move. He'd miss all this chat, she thought, when the NTV exclusive took over at four.

Outside the dress shop, statutarily, they left the reporters, Harry in midsentence. Katherine sat him firmly down on a spindly gold chair while she went around gathering armfuls of summery clothes from the racks. Then she kissed him lightly on the forehead and patted his arm good-bye. He looked up, pleased, remembering their morning. She whisked away to one of the trying-on rooms.

The three mirrors caught her momentarily—Vincent Ferriman's hot property, Dr. Mason's terminal case, Peter's Katie-Mo, her father's fucking nuisance, Gerald's armored cruiser, John Peel's pickup, Harry's newly hard person, her own . . .

her own worst enemy? The phrase, as is the way with clichés, saved her from making any real effort. It even had a certain hideous aptness. She smiled, and watched reflections of reflections of reflections of the smile. Then she broke away—none of them, none of it, lumpy, with elbows, was *she*—she broke away from the mirrors, dumped the clothes on a chair, and went back out of the trying-on room.

She hovered around the back of a tall showcase, then looked cautiously around its end. Harry was no Mr. Mathiesson. He was where she had left him, dutifully, his legs crossed, jiggling his top foot and watching it. He would stay there for a long time. Half an hour. Longer even. He was patient. And endearingly trying to be smart, legs crossed, showing a lot of sock. She evaded an approaching assistant and quietly made her way out of the shop by another entrance. No other good-bye was possible. Or desirable.

She hailed a taxi, climbed in, and asked to be taken to a residential block a few minutes' walk from the heliport. No doubt Vincent would eventually trace her as far as the heliport, but she saw no reason to make things easy for him. She sat back in the taxi, and relaxed, and watched the people and cars stream by. And was suddenly committed.

Boats burned. Committed. Alone. Literally, metaphorically, alone.

The plan—no, not even the plan, the impossible dream—the impossible dream was now real. Without really noticing it, she had kicked off from the edge of the everyday, kicked off into the dream, kicked off into a world where there was only she. A place where she had only her own word to take for her very existence. If only she could have said good-bye—to Harry, to John Peel, to Gerald, to her father, to Dr. Mason, to Vincent, to somebody—if only she could have said good-bye to somebody, then her going would have seemed less final, less of a total cessation. She was alone, and dying, and there was no one to *know*. No one who did not in some manner regard her as property, to be kept track of and cashed in when the time was right. No one, that is—and she fumbled with the switch on the intercom, oh God, were her fingers going to fail her now?—no one except Peter.

"Computabook," she said, getting the switch right at last. "Drive me to Computabook. Then wait." It wouldn't take long. "It won't take long. Will you please do that?"

The delay, any delay, was crazy. This was her only chance to get away. These were her last few moments before the grief-buyers took over. Soon they would be after her. Searching. But she had to say good-bye to somebody, so that there would be somebody who *knew*.

Computabook was deserted, blank, shut for the weekend. Other people's lives, of course, still had shape. She suffered a moment's panic, not knowing Peter's home adress—how could she have worked with him for so long and never inquired, never been interested in, where he lived, and how, and with whom?—but then she remembered phone booths. Phone booths had directories.

The taxi driver took her to the nearest phone booth, and then on. Peter lived, she discovered, in a block exactly like her own, in a flat exactly like her own. Only the furnishings were different, sitting uneasily, impertinently, against the familiar walls. It seemed that Peter had been in bed when she rang. This shocked her: in bed, wasting the day, at nearly noon. But he belted his dressing gown and asked her in, and made her unquestioningly welcome.

She followed him into his sitting room, her sitting room messed up with all the wrong chairs and the wrong clock. The view from the window was wrong too. She shouldn't have come.

A man's voice called from the bedroom, "Who is it, love?" and Peter went and put his head around the door and there was a short, inaudible conversation. Katherine wandered around the room, touching all the horrible furniture. When Peter returned she came at once to the point. Say it, and then she could go.

"I'm running away. I expect you'll see a lot about it in the papers. I wanted you to know." *Know* was an inadequate word, but it was all she had.

"How can I help?" Peter said.

His question, so gentle, made her cry. She hadn't expected to cry. She wasn't a crying person. "I came to say good-bye. That's all. And to explain. I've accepted a lot of money. The papers will—"

"You don't have to explain, Katie-Mo. You're your own woman."

"That's what I mean. Perhaps I'm not. Perhaps I shouldn't be."

"You're dying. That's between you and it. Not many things are, but that is."

It was as if he lived inside her conscience. He said things that nobody else could. And he didn't ask her where she was going, or what she was going to do.

"You don't think I'm running away?"

"If you stayed you'd be running away a whole lot more. Staying would be a sort of suicide."

She nodded. He was confirming what she had had to question.

"So you'll know I'm all right? When the papers start screaming, you'll know I'm going on? You'll know I'm somewhere, and all right?"

"I'd never have doubted it."

He put his arm around her and comforted her. He was so young, and he didn't know a plot loop from a denouement phase. Oddly, for Gerald had been as hetero as they came, he reminded her of her first husband. But she and Gerald had both been young then.

"I'm not an armored cruiser," she said. "I don't think I ever was."

He patted her, and moved her gently away. "Come along now. If this goes on much longer we'll be making Somebody jealous." He found a crumpled handkerchief in his dressing gown pocket and gave it to her for her face. It had lipstick on it, but she didn't mind.

"Good-bye then."

"Good-bye, Katie-Mo."

Going down in the elevator she looked at her watch. The half hour she had allowed Harry was long expired. If Harry found she was gone, and rang Vincent, then Vincent might put out a general alarm. She wished now that she had chosen somewhere other than the heliport—it swarmed with policemen at the best of times. She gave up any idea of covering her tracks and got the taxi driver to take her straight there. The sooner she did what she had to do and got away out of it, the better. She told him, as an afterthought, that she was hoping to catch the twelve-forty-five to Amsterdam.

For all she knew, there might even be a twelve-forty-five for Amsterdam.

The driver set her down at the main entrance. Beyond the edges of the awning drizzle fell in a steady gray screen.

Fumbling in her handbag for the fare money she had never felt more conspicuous. She had run up an enormous bill on the meter and had scarcely enough money. She emptied out her purse down to the very last coin and gave him the lot. The tip turned out to be quite generous—as the last taxi driver in her life he deserved it. She was leaving the money world behind.

He accepted it with little joy. "I hope NTV knows where you're off to, Mrs. Mortenhoe."

"Of course." She smiled at him brightly. Up to then he hadn't spoken. Perhaps he was a Vincent spy. "I'm not staying. I'm going to choose some bulbs. Pretty daffodils in pots."

"You won't like Amsterdam," he said, signaling to drive off. "It's full of these Americans."

She laughed, more than the joke demanded, if it was a joke, and watched him drive away. He wasn't a spy, she decided, just one of her public jealous of his rights.

She was recognized again just inside the foyer.

"Need any help, Mrs. Mortenhoe?" Two policemen, friendly, before she had time to run, time to be afraid even. She told them the Amsterdam story, which they believed. "Bet it's raining there too, Mrs. Mortenhoe." But their radiophones might at any time betray her. "Well, ma'am, ticket office over there. If you need any help, just say."

She thanked them calmly and walked, did not run, away in the direction they indicated. She changed direction only when she was sure she was lost in the crowd. There was a notice on the wall of the left luggage office. It told her what she should have known, what she really did know, already: *Passengers Withdrawing Luggage Should Place a 50p Piece in the Slot Provided.*

She did not have a 50p piece. She had rushed into symbolic poverty five minutes too soon.

Her first crazy impulse was to run out after the taxi driver and demand her money back, her tip that his surliness did not deserve. Then she took herself in hand and wondered instead what she had with her that she could possibly sell —in the environs of the heliport probably nothing, not even her dear old fanny. Well then, if you needed money in a hurry, and the banks were closed for the weekend, and you had nothing to sell . . . well then, you begged or borrowed or stole. Of these three she decided briskly that the last would be the least emotionally demanding.

For a quarter of an hour or so she wandered vainly around the public departments of the heliport, looking for a pocket she could pick or a purse she could snatch. Then she tried banging coffee machines for rejected coins. The situation was rapidly tipping over into farce. In her head she was screaming with laughter. Screaming with screaming.

In the end she did what she had once actually seen another woman do, and been too astounded to intervene. She walked quickly into the nearest shop, took a packet of stockings openly from a display rack and went with it to the busiest counter. Desperate situations called for desperate remedies.

"Excuse me," she said grandly. "I bought these here about ten minutes ago, and—"

"Not from me, you didn't."

The face across from hers was a rat-trap. "No, from one of the other girls. When I got them out into the daylight I saw they were quite the wrong color."

"Where's your bill, then?"

"Bill? I suppose it's still in the bag."

"Let's have a see then."

"Oh dear." She did her best to sound fluffy. "Should I have kept it?"

"You should."

There shouldn't have been a rat-trap. There should have been a nice motherly woman who would pay up without question. That was what there'd been on the other occasion.

". . . I'm afraid I put it in one of those bin things. I suppose I could go and dig it out. . . ."

"Yerse. I suppose you could."

The rat-trap was examining Katherine, her clothes, her nice expensive handbag (an engagement present from Harry, the handbag), her face. Her face made the rat-trap tighten, hesitate, then open. "Give 'em here, then."

The stockings were snatched out of her hand. "Can't have Mrs. bloody fancy Mortenhoe dirtying her bloody fancy hands in the litter basket, now can we?"

"They were one twenty-eight," Katherine said, keeping her voice steady. She was a thief. She was planning to cheat Vincent. She was planning to cheat the shop. She could expect humiliation.

"Innit bleeding funny? The more some people got, the more they bleeding want."

The money came back across the counter, tossed insultingly. Katherine scrabbled it up and went. Behind her somebody was being told loudly about Mrs. bleeding Mortenhoe who could afford a hundred pairs of bleeding stockings, and anyway who was going to look at her bleeding legs, her with this bleeding nasty disease and all?

Back in the left luggage department Katherine leaned against her locker and counted the hard round coins in her hand. One twenty-eight. Her humiliation had been worth it. Incidental. She had never felt so rich. She retrieved her sleeping bag holdall and still had seventy-eight. Even after the lavatory cubicle slot she still had seventy-three. She was rich.

Changing in the confined space was awkward. On either side of her women came, and flushed, and went. She'd seen sinisterly shut cubicle doors herself, and heard inexplicable noises, and imagined uncomfortable lesbiana. Now at last she knew what had really been happening. Behind the closed doors women had been taking off their old lives and shrugging themselves awkwardly into the new.

The under-robe fitted fairly well, but the outer one was much too long, so she hitched it up at the waist and let it hang down over the plaited belt. The necklace looked really quite pretty. She wondered if fringe women wore panties and bras. She decided she didn't care very much either way: they wouldn't show under the rest of the ridiculous outfit, and she'd feel safer with them on. She found she still had Peter's lipsticky handkerchief, and used it to wipe off most of her makeup, leaving her face suitably dirty-greasy. She folded her Katherine Mortenhoe clothes and put them in the holdall, together with her handbag and shoes. She'd have liked to be rid of the clothes, and with them all reminders of her old self, but there was no point in telling Vincent's men that she was now revised, reformed, made over. She'd dump them later, somewhere they wouldn't be so easily found.

She tried walking in the clogs: two tiny paces forward and two back. The thick socks helped her to keep them on. She thought she'd manage. She slid her arms into the vast survival jacket, put on goggles and sou'wester, and was ready.

She was a freak, a shambling grostesque. Opening that cubicle door, facing the world, took more courage than anything else on that courage-demanding day. She was disgusting. If she wasn't picked up for being Katherine Mortenhoe in breach of a three hundred thousand pound contract, she'd be picked up for being a danger to public health and morals. . . . She reasoned with herself, reminded herself of the Fringe People about the city, weird, self-absorbed transients to be stared at or not stared at depending on how you were brought up, but never on any account to be spoken to. Even the police, seeing them as booby-trapped, liable to go off at any minute, preferred where possible to pass by on the other side.

So Katherine drew a deep breath, opened the cubicle door, picked up her holdall, and walked out. She was free. Free from Harry, free from Vincent, free from Dr. Mason, free from everyone except herself. And thus free, exultantly, to explore that particular bondage.

On her way out across the heliport concourse, clattering still awkwardly on her wooden soles, she sought out the policemen who had been so kind. She walked past them slowly, brazenly. One of them looked steadfastly the other way. His companion shook a playful, appeasing truncheon. It came to her that in them she was seeing her one-time, ordinary self. Both of them, unconsciously, in their own different ways, were warding off the evil eye.

When Harry rang to tell Vincent his wife had skipped it I was sitting there, right across the Ferriman desk. We'd only just got in from the police station, and I was scarcely gay. Bailing me out had taken a terribly long time and a great number of buff forms in triplicate. Even if I'd been as innocent as a lamb I wouldn't have felt it, not by the time they'd finished with me. So goddamned *civil*, every one of them.

Harry was in a state. I could hear every word, even from where I was sitting. Vincent smiled at me, at Harry, and held the receiver well away from his ear, so's I'd feel I belonged.

". . . And now she's disappeared. No luggage or anything. Just disappeared."

"Taken her handbag?"

"I expect so. Yes—of course she's taken her handbag."

"Then we don't have to worry, do we?"

A great one for essentials, Vincent was. A long pause followed, long enough for him to cut and light one of his cigars. A pause during which Harry breathed, audibly screwing himself up.

"I . . . don't know what you must think of us—of her. I mean, she signed a contract, and now—"

"So did you, Harry. You signed a contract too."

"I've stuck to it. I've done my part. I wouldn't be ringing you if—"

"You're worried about all that money, Harry. Of course you are." Vincent sounded so very kind and gentle and understanding.

"Not at all. I'm worried about my wife."

I'd never imagined I would like Harry. Now I was certain I wouldn't. Vincent, on the other hand, loved him more and more with every moment. The more people failed, the more he loved them. He loved them for confirming his judgment. And he was my boss. I worked for him. I chose to work for him.

"We'll look after your wife, Harry. You mustn't worry. *And* we'll make sure she sticks to the contract."

"Need it be the police?"

"Who said anything about the police?"

"Well, she's broken the law, hasn't she?"

"I can understand your concern for her, Harry." His anger against her. "Look, old man, she's not even in breach of contract until four. And after that it'd take a court order, an injunction, and God knows what else, before we could call in the police. So you don't have to worry."

"I'm glad. Thank you, Vincent. Thank you very much."

Again he breathed. The questions really important to him were no longer askable. Possibly, just possibly, he believed he didn't want to ask them, believed he hadn't even thought of them. Vincent tried to knock the first quarter-inch of ash off his cigar but it wouldn't come away. He frowned at it.

"Harry? You still there?"

"I—" Of course he was still there.

"It was good of you to call, Harry. Keep this between ourselves, shall we? Just till I've thought what to do?"

"Of course. But how will you—?"

"Good man. Leave the whole thing to me, then. And Harry? You mustn't worry, Harry. There's absolutely nothing to worry about."

He rang off. Even if Harry hadn't been worried before, he certainly would be now. Vincent leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. Katherine Mortenhoe had skipped it, had placed herself outside the law. The poor thieving dope should have known better. Men like Vincent, corporations like NTV, don't cheat all that easy.

"Thanks to those bloody marchers," Vincent said, "she never met you. You can go to her as a stranger. As a friend. . . . It's the opportunity of your professional career."

He'd made it sound just about as nasty as he could. By way of an inoculation, I suppose.

When I finally arrived at the church on Coronation Square it was late in the day, and I was glad of my shabby anorak against the damp, gray evening. The jeans and duffle bag were mine, and the two old gardening sweaters from my days with Tracey, but the anorak had been Vincent's idea. An assistant had borrowed it from the wardrobe mistress. She had them in all sizes and colors and stages of decay, and she'd made me sign for it in her little book.

I checked in at the church vestry—the vicar just waved me through and made a mark on a board—and followed arrows down an aisle to the main dormitory transept. The lights were already lit, yellow bulbs under tin shades on the end of long flexes, and I saw Katherine Mortenhoe almost at once. She was sitting on her bunk, isolated from the listless grumbling of the others by her trouble. As far as they were concerned, she might not have been there at all. This was no fringie commune—if you were in trouble here nobody knew you. Their troubles were their own. They fed them, and were fed by them. Otherwise you could be damn sure they wouldn't be here. It was well known that Vicar Pemberton took in those whom none of the government agencies would have.

There were other women, but not even they took any notice of Katherine Mortenhoe. They sat, bundled in layers of greatcoats, tying and untying the strings around their various paper parcels, busily not seeing Katherine Mortenhoe. Not seeing her trouble.

D.T.'s, you'd have said. Meths, surgical spirit, window cleaner . . . you name it, she'd been drinking it. She had the worst shakes anybody in that noble company of shakers had probably ever seen. So they kept away. Lived and let live. Died and let die.

I picked a bunk four away from hers, sat down, took off my boots. If I was angry with her, it was for playing a game with us and losing. If I was angry with myself, it was for letting my night in the police cell so get me down. I'd do far better if I left out all the guilt bit and got on with the job. I was a reporter. And there was always the chance that I might be able actually to help.

At least she wasn't flailing and wailing. Her shakes were most discreet. I watched her in long shot. Nobody'd be surprised if I went over and spoke to her. Though I wasn't dressed like her, wasn't quite a fringie, we were obviously neither of us hard-core church property. Transients, more like, on the way from somewhere to somewhere. So nobody'd be surprised if we sort of teamed up. . . . First, though, I needed some establishing shots. Something for the opening sequence. And from what I could see of her around the goggles she didn't look too miserable. Just caught in one of Dr. Mason's rigors, and waiting for it to go away. I even, methodical Katherine Mortenhoe, saw her glance at her watch.

I panned around the dormitory. Ex-army two-tier bunks, bentwood chairs, worn paving stones, people. People shambling in, people sitting around, people coughing and scratching and groaning. Such people. I was glad it wasn't Tasmania. Beside this sort of social realism Tasmania was mere travelogue. The nave of the church was given over to eating and cooking arrangements. A sign pointed the way to *Ablutions* through a door behind the pulpit. While beyond the screen the sanctuary was dark and silent, a single red flame burning, a tiny spark of mystery in this most unmysterious of worlds. . . .

A tiny spark of mystery—it was a good phrase, one I'd like to get back to Vincent. I made a note to dub it in later. I could hardly sit there on my bunk in the crowded dormitory and talk noble tellyese to nobody in particular. The ablutions, I hoped, would give me the privacy I needed.

Hot air blasted up through grilles in the floor, making the place smell of sweat, and cheap dinners, and scorched dust. High above us the medieval vaulting had been painted and richly gilded in some last-stand moment of magnificence, but it was at the grilles that we warmed our hands and hearts. We kept our voices low also, in case echo should take them up and expose us to the indifferent stones. . . .

I wasn't watching Katherine Mortenhoe at the precise moment when she fell off her bunk, but the small noise she made and the chain reaction of short-lived silence that followed it immediately attracted my attention. Anyway, panning back to the bed and suddenly finding it empty was technically more interesting. I got up and went in my stockinged feet over to where she lay. Her rigor appeared to have eased. Evidently she was on to Day Two in Dr. Mason's guided tour.

Everybody was watching me. And listening. "We all go to hell in our own ways," I said. "But I think mine's better."

They were my first words to her ever. To *her*, ignoring the others. And if later she'd ever asked me to explain, I would have denied them. She had no right to explanations. She was a middle-aged woman, dirty, indescribably dressed, paralytic, dishonest, lying on the scrubbed paving of a down-and-out's church dormitory. She was lying, in fact, on the memorial stone to one Suzann Pierce, beloved wife of Samuel Pierce, mother of Jonathan, Mary, Cathcart, Borden, and Sumner, born 1793, died 1867. So I stooped, and lifted her off the stone, and hoped she would never read it, and put her back on the bed.

"I've had it before," she said. "It passes."

"I hope you're right." It occurred to me that if she was going to pass as a wino she ought to smell of the stuff. "What are you using?" I said. "Horse? Or just bennies?"

She stared at me. Clearly the idea of an alibi hadn't entered her head. "Something of the sort," she said finally.

I sat down on the bed. It creaked unpleasantly beneath our combined weights. On it I noticed her handbag, the invaluable handbag. Without it we'd never have traced her. We should have known enough about her, but we didn't. Discussing it, and bearing in mind the taxi driver's information, we'd placed her in dark glasses and an expensive wig, somewhere sunny six hours' flying time or so out of Amsterdam. After all, she had the money. The call from Vincent's tail showed us just how little we knew about her.

"Why not let me take off those goggles?" I said.

"Just leave me."

"Hell no." The viewers needed a proper look but I reckoned it could wait. "Where you from?"

She just stared.

"Where you going?"

If there was a rule among our sort that these things weren't asked, she didn't know it. "Out of town," she said.

"So am I."

"Not in my direction."

"The way you look you could do with company."

"No."

I waited, but nothing else was coming so I got up and went back to my own bunk. If she wasn't ready, she wasn't ready. There was plenty of time. Instead I tried, for local color, to get into conversation with the man on the bunk overhead. "Not a bad old place," I offered in his general direction.

After a pause I offered it again. One idea at a time, not to strain him. He leaned down over the edge of his mattress.

"A bloody fine lot you know about it. Greenhorn."

So it showed. "Never too late to learn," I said.

"Never said a truer word, mate."

"So teach me."

He hesitated, then surprisingly produced my boots. "Lesson number one. Yer boots is yer best friend. Never let yer mince pies off of them."

"Thank you very much." I reached up for them.

"Hoi, hoi. . . . Thank you very much, he says." He dangled my boots higher. "These boots is going to cost yer."

"How much?"

"A quid."

"Haven't got it."

"Haven't got it?"

"You heard me."

I had the rest of the night to spend in that dormitory. If I admitted to money I was sunk. I could have snatched the boots and pounded the old wreck to a pulp. Except that by now we had gathered an audience, and I doubted if they'd love me for it.

"Haven't got it?"

"Would I be in this dump if I had that sort of money?"

"Dump, he says. Not a bad old place, he says. Ought to make his bleeding mind up, I say."

"Five bob. And that's tomorrow's dinner."

"Five bob? Do me a favor."

Against all common sense I was losing my temper. "Look, you're an old man. I—"

"And you—" He leaned over farther, showing me the rusty blade of a surgical scalpel. "And you, sonny, are a flaming nig-nog." There was laughter. He dropped the boots into my lap. "Go on," he said, "have the flaming things. They was too big anyway. Thing is, you might of been from the Benefit. Get up to all sorts, they do."

I put the boots on. They were missing their laces but the lesson was cheap at the price. Only the man from the Benefit would have argued. I punched the bulging mattress above my head. Not too hard. My mentor was delighted.

"You watch it, mate. Just you watch it." He threw down the laces. "Lesson number two—never take the bottom bunk. Where'll you be when I pisses me pit come morning?"

"Same place as you, friend. Up shit creek without a paddle."

There was more laughter. But the repartee wasn't mine (I was too cautious that evening), it was Katherine Mortenhoe's. Seemingly her paralysis went as quickly as it came. She was standing, leaning on the bunk support, her face inches away from the gent's upstairs. He glared back.

"Fuck me," he said, "I do believe it's a woman."

"I wouldn't fuck you, friend, not if the future of the human race depended on it."

"Think I'd trust my cock to your pox-shot old fanny?"

It was a new insight into the continuous, the only true Katherine Mortenhoe. She was, in this, her father's daughter. Though why she had come to my assistance I couldn't imagine. . . . Anyway, I'd kept her in picture—Vincent could buzz out any of the words he didn't like. I saw now that she had nothing left. She had come out with only just so much ammunition, and a shield only just so thick.

I stood up, and led her away, back to her bedspace. Jeers followed us. But the old man could be allowed his victory. They could all be allowed their victory. Mine was an entrance into the only true Katherine Mortenhoe. And hers . . . well, I didn't suppose she really had one.

She'd thought him very kind, and—in this order—very sensitive, very intelligent, and very handsome. The beard did not hide his fine bone structure. He had a strange accent, not quite American, but pleasant all the same. And she'd sent him away because there was no room in what was left of her life for people, no, for men who were kind and

sensitive and intelligent and handsome. And young. She'd made the correction out of honesty, as she lay on her back waiting for the paralysis to go away. Then a further honesty had corrected her yet again, and she had rescued him, and he had rescued her. She was forty-four, and dressed like a freak, and dying, and therefore safe. And her new freedom meant she could make friends of whom she chose. Could, in fact, make friends.

He said his name was Rod. She told him her name was Sarah—the American stepmother's name had been Sarah, Saree. Surnames among their sort were obviously never used. Neither was the past. He admired her clothes, calling them klutzy, but without the scorn of the young woman in the container depot. She wished she knew more of the mores of the people she had joined. His group wasn't quite her group—perhaps under different circumstances, with his really quite respectable jeans and sweater, they would have been sworn enemies. She was glad he accepted her. He was young and strong and confident, all the things she wasn't. Tomorrow frightened her. He'd said he was leaving town. If he'd still have her, she'd tag along, just till they were out of Vincent's watchful city.

At lights-out a single lamp was left burning yellowly high up under the vaulting. For late-comers, the vicar said, and she was grateful for it. Her day of doing-not-brooding was nearly over. She knew she would not sleep for a long time and she feared the darkness. In darkness brooding would be all that was left.

She lay and stared at the sagging mesh of the bunk above. She thought of the woman lying on it. Would she piss her pit, this woman for whom she should have had some fellow feeling but who was blankets tied with string, old beyond guessing, with poor swollen hands and a way of drinking her tea as if it were in that moment everything? Katherine could not begin to imagine the connections that made her move and stop moving, eat and stop eating.

She thought instead of Vicar Pemberton, made real in the walls about her. His hostel had been an obvious staging point. He had let her in without question, had accepted her just as he had accepted her unhappiness, that other woman's unhappiness, over the telephone. Perhaps indeed he needed worries not his own. Though now that she had seen him, awkward, forcing himself, unprotected by the distancing de-

vice of the telephone, she thought not. He was driven by a larger need. In his vestry, above his table, a card: *Come to me all ye that are heavily laden*. At some time he had found out, or been found out. Now he was working to make it true.

She understood his connections very well. And felt sad for him. And slept.

Her very early morning rigor was becoming something of a habit. She woke, saw night, and was irritated. After breakfast she had a long way to go, and she needed every bit of sleep she could get. She found she was sweating also. That was new. She glanced along the beds and was relieved to see that Rod too was sleepless, sitting propped up against the wall behind his bed. Then suddenly her eyes seemed to diverge, and there were two of him, and then a steady movement of the two of him from left to right that she couldn't check. Dr. Mason's words rang in her ears: rigor, paralysis, sweating, coordination loss, double vision, incontinence, hallucination, progressive autonomic breakdown bringing on . . . Rather that than Lord of Upper Egypt.

She closed her eyes, hoping that the incontinence would at least wait until she was out of the hostel.

Then Rod was sitting on the bed beside her. She wondered why. "Did I make a noise?" she said.

"Not a sound. But I don't sleep much. I saw you were awake, so—"

"It's not drugs." She wanted him to know that. "Just a thing I've got. A . . . sort of malaria." Malaria was an Aimee Paladine disease. It was tidy: you lay and shook, and then got bravely better.

"Don't talk," he said. "You'll wake up the others."

She got her hand out from under the bedclothes and reached for his. With her eyes shut it was easier, less of an admission. After a tiny hesitation he let her take his hand. She didn't mind the hesitation—she was hardly appetizing—but she was glad he overcame it.

She held his hand for a long time. A picture of Harry came into her head, of his hand in hers as she sat beside him on a bed and he slept. Situations recurred, permutated, expressed endlessly the same few pathetic human needs. She wondered, without guilt, what hand if any Harry would now be holding. And, tired out, the figure three hundred thousand circling in her dreams, slept again.

In fact the hand Harry was holding had cost him rather less. It was stout and motherly, and Harry had sought it in anger. Anger that Katherine could make him the husband of a liar and a cheat, could make him ridiculous before a shopful of girls and then unworthy before the all-seeing Vincent. He had sought a pair of breasts not hers, and legs not hers between which he could exercise the skill that had been her special delight. When the skill had failed him he had been folded in such care and professional tenderness that his purpose had faded, and he had sighed, and found in the dark a hand, stout and motherly, that asked nothing he could not afford, and gave, in the dark, everything that he needed.

SIX *Sunday*

When Katherine woke sunlight was streaming, crimson and blue, through the windows high above her bed. She instantly remembered the circumstances of her disturbed night and, squirming, was cheered to find that she hadn't—such a charming phrase—pissed her pit. Next she looked for Rod. He was nowhere to be seen. She didn't blame him for leaving early, for going on wherever it was without her—now that it was morning she didn't even mind. She could manage perfectly well on her own.

The noise that had wakened her was the voice of Vicar Pemberton, rising and falling in muddled echoes between the pillars and white marble monuments. Nobody in the dormitory stirred. She worked out that it must be Sunday morning, and that Vicar Pemberton must be praying. Her new freedom allowed her curiosity, so she sat up in bed, slipped on her goggles and sou'wester, and then padded barefoot along the transept in her quilted under-robe.

Drawn by his voice, she approached the screen. Beyond it she saw him, stooping and straightening, bending one by one over a line of three kneeling women and a very blonde little girl. She wondered what he was doing. Behind him thick white candles burned on the altar. It was all very holy, and she wished . . . Coming quickly to the end of his tiny congregation, the vicar turned away, faced the candles, and raised his voice, the words becoming louder but still confused against the surrounding ancient stonework. His getup, she thought, already a snob, was ever so klutzy.

Suddenly she knew she was being watched. She turned, backed against the smooth wooden columns of the screen. At the far end of the nave, beyond the stoves and the lines of refectory tables, Rod was standing. He moved, and came

toward her, trailing his hands on the tabletops as he came. She felt his gaze. Was she so important?

"I've been out for a walk around. The rain's blown over. We'll be able to get off right after breakfast."

Then his voice was so ordinary, so safe, that she could have cried. "Don't shout so," she said crossly. "People are praying."

She turned back toward the altar and he came and stood behind her and looked over her shoulder. "It looks as if the service is just over," he whispered. "Early morning Communion."

"I know that." She noticed the big silver cup, no, *chalice.* "The giving of the body and blood."

"That's right." She felt him shudder.

"I think it's rather beautiful."

"Do you?"

"You sound surprised."

"Frankly I am surprised."

He was saying something more. She stiffened, and waited.

"I'm not saying I blame you, Katherine, but isn't that more or less what you're afraid of? People eating your body and blood?"

"My name is Sarah."

"If you say so."

She would have run, but his hands were closed tightly on her shoulders. The time and the place were wrong for an undignified scuffle. Besides, running away was useless. She tried to think. How had she been discovered? What should she do now to keep her freedom? Kill him? He had come so near to being her friend she could do it easily. But the idea was too high-pitched. Perhaps she could buy him.

"What do you want?" she said.

"I don't want anything."

"Of course you do." People in the pews in front were turning around to stare. He was right. They would, if they knew, they would eat her. "Of course you want something. If you didn't you would have pretended you didn't know."

"Sooner or later you'd have remembered last night. Me seeing you without your getup. Pretending between people like us is always silly. There has to be honesty, if . . ."

"If what?"

He hesitated. "If I stick around," he said, "maybe I can help. These things are easier with two."

I hesitated. Even with her I could talk about honesty for only just so long and then no longer. "If I stick around," I said, "maybe I can help. These things are easier with two." And meant it.

In front of us the Communion service was over. I drew Katherine Mortenhoe to one side to let the four sad celebrants out. They passed us, two visiting anthropologists, with awkward, sideways glances, and went away down between the tables. They didn't *look* as if they had just known their god. Pemberton came after them, very tall in his white whatever-it-was.

"Ritual," he said, possibly apologizing. "We all need it."

"I expect you're right, Vicar."

No need to tread on any toes. There might, after all, be some believers among the viewers. He went to one of the stoves and lit the gas under a huge tea urn, then trailed away in the direction of the vestry. I envied him his simple duties.

"Go back to bed," I said to Katherine Mortenhoe. "We'll talk about it later. You'll catch your deather, standing here on these stones in your bare feet. Not to mention what certain people may get up to with your boots."

And watched her pad away down the transept, and climb into bed, and cover herself, goggles, sou'wester and all, with her blanket. . . . The thing was, I'd been out to talk to Vincent. It was too early for him to be in the monitoring room, so I'd rung his flat, and got past his answering service, and he'd told me I was doing fine. They'd called him down to see a rerun of the scene in the middle of the night—it had everything, atmosphere, drama, pathos, everything. However—and there had to be a however—there unfortunately hadn't been quite enough light for a positive identification. The viewers would want one, so would I please hurry one along?

"What you'd really like," I said, "is a close shot of the celebrated mole on her celebrated right titty."

"Don't take it to heart, old man." As if I would. "Remember, we're doing her a kindness in the long run. What she never knows she'll never grieve over."

He was right, of course—though she'd never thank us for it, by cheating her rotten we were doing her a favor. The alternative, a court injunction and filming under police protection, had been found to please the viewers just as much.

So I doused my conscience, and wished Vincent sweet dreams, and on the way back to the church worked out the old honesty-between-friends spiel. After all, I reasoned, I could perfectly well help her with one hand, even as I stabbed her painlessly in the back with the other. Ho ho.

Breakfast was all good stuff: rows of shoveling, fractious people, whom Pemberton served with positively saintlike humility. Vincent would love him, would love the whole set-up. I'd have stayed to get more footage, only Katherine was restless, and pressing to be off. I could hardly tell her she was as safe where she was as she'd ever be.

Outside the church we paused. I could feel that even after the little talk we'd had under cover of the snuffling breakfasters, she was still suspicious of me.

Feeling that some sort of eye to the main chance would make me more credible, I said, "Do we walk? Or do we use your money?"

"I haven't any."

"Don't give me that. The papers said three hundred thousand."

"That was for Harry. I've got just seventy-three pence."

Which showed, I supposed, a sort of integrity. "Then we'd both better go on Transients' Benefit."

She thought about it. "It's Sunday morning," she said.

"Seven-day week, twenty-four-hour service. They like to keep us moving."

"They'll ask all sorts of questions. You know I don't want questions."

"If you're leaving town they're not nosy." It surprised me that she hadn't done her research. Her efficiency had odd gaps in it. "They hand out to transients on demand. It's only if you go back that they start being awkward."

She picked up her holdall. "I've got a lot to learn," she said. "And not much time to learn it in."

She wrote her own fade lines, this girl.

We trailed untelegenically along to the Benefit Bureau, stood in line, had our fingerprints checked, and collected our ten pounds. She nearly jibbed at the fingerprinting, but I shook my head reassuringly and she trusted me. Afterward I explained that, thanks to the Civil Liberties people, Benefit computers were self-serving, kept separate from the National Data Grid. . . . This was a lie, of course: if Vincent had put out a General Hold her prints would have fired off

rockets in police stations right across the city. But she believed me. It didn't escape my notice that she believed me. I must have been a very belief-inspiring sort of person.

The cash in hand cheered her up.

"Where to now?" she said, almost laughing at the excitement of it all.

I gestured widely, following her mood. "All roads lead out of town."

So we tossed a coin, which she loved, and took a bus as far as the Western Ring. Beyond that the buses weren't running, on account of the marchers.

During the ride she had one of her shakes, but she controlled it very well and I needed several close shots to make the point. It showed most in her hands. We talked, for want of anything else, about the political situation. I'd been out of the media for some time, and didn't really know enough to go with my jeans, but she knew even less. Certainly she wasn't ready yet to talk about the one thing that deeply interested both of us.

The bus put us down within sight of the Ring Road. She was thrilled, and hurried toward the marchers as if she were afraid of being late and missing something. They'd be still marching, I reckoned, long after she was dead. Her idiotic clogs were loose, and she almost fell. I didn't want to watch her. She was like a child on her first visit to the zoo. I think that was the moment when I gave up trying to fit together the various Katherine Mortenhoes. What would emerge, would emerge. And a lot of it, surprisingly, was going to be fun.

I caught up with her. Seeing the marchers again like that gave me a nasty feeling. "They do it in relays," I told her. "Day and night. Round and round. Like white mice."

"Now you're being flip. At least they believe in whatever it is."

"Yes," I said. "Like white mice."

I wanted her to argue, but she didn't. "We're all white mice," she said, suddenly quite cold, and I felt ashamed of having loused it all up. Some marchers waved to us, wanting us to join them, and I put one arm around Katherine and shook my head, and they laughed and carried on, and I said, "They think you're my girl," and that one too fell on its face.

She broke away from me and pushed through the marching column. In her klutzy clothes she wasn't one of them,

but they let her through. They let me through also. At least neither of us was flash in the latest three-hundred-horse-power drophead.

She was waiting for me on the far side of the road, leaning against a lamp post. "You've been very helpful," she said. "Now I'd rather manage on my own."

"That's your privilege." I pointed at the long straight road ahead. "But there's only one road. Would you rather walk in front or behind?"

I knew I must play it easy. But anything was a gamble: she could perfectly well sit down where she was and let me go on without her. That would leave me in a hole of my own digging.

He was mocking her. She was old, and naïve, and dressed up in ridiculous clothes, and low on a sense of humor, and she could not endure to be mocked. She sat down heavily on her sleeping bag holdall, ignoring the stacked-up cars waiting for a gap in the marchers.

"You go first," she said. "Youth before beauty."

He went. A few yards off he turned back. "Look, I'm sorry I was ham-handed. When I said I wanted to help I meant it."

She saw guilt in his face, and a sense of responsibility. She was nobody's responsibility. And nobody was hers. Not anymore. "You have helped. I'm very grateful. But now I must manage on my own. Call it woman's pride."

Because she believed he wanted no alternative, she gave him none.

"Please yourself." He shrugged, and set off away down the road. She could sense his relief. At fifty yards he looked back over his shoulder, and again at a hundred. She watched him diminish. She was free.

On one side of the road cars queued between closed Sunday morning shops and deserted Sunday morning pavements. The other side lay black and straight and empty. Behind her the marchers passed, horribly, in silence, like ants. Or like white mice. There was no more anger, or Harry, or Barbara, or Private Grief, or Vincent. There were no more plans, no more alternatives. No more Rod. She was nobody's responsibility and nobody was hers. She was free of all these refuges. Free to warm her hands at her woman's pride.

She shivered, not from a rigor but because she was cold.

When Rod was out of sight at last around a distant corner she got up and went slowly after him. She had made an important discovery. Her freedom was as restricted, as pragmatic, as it had always been. After the bus fare she had eight pounds seventy-eight, and most of twenty-three days in which to spend it. She could not go back to the church hostel, and the country—which she now admitted might not be quite so filled with lover-accommodating haystacks as Ethel Pargeter made out—was still a long way away. In addition, Vicar Pemberton's charitable breakfast had not been quite what she was accustomed to. And finally, although yesterday's drizzle had passed over, the early morning sun had disappeared, and the day was gray and chilly, and the drizzle anyway might easily come back.

She went slowly, not wishing to catch up to Rod. She did not grieve for him as a person—that had been the night's nonsense—but she had to admit that as an authority on transience he could have been invaluable. No doubt it was possible to die with dignity even though cold and wet and hungry by an urban thruway. . . . Even so, readily to accept, or even to seek out, such a situation seemed to her verging on the vulgar.

So she didn't dodge back out of sight when she rounded the once-distant corner and saw him sitting on the curb, one boot off, examining his foot. And when she went on up to him and he didn't let her see his blister but quickly put his sock and boot back on again, she felt it was a time for making compromises. For reasons that she did not even try to understand the relationship between them must have two-way advantages.

"We're not very good at this," she said. "Perhaps we should try for a lift."

He tied his boot-lace very slowly. "Have you looked at us?" he said finally. She was glad of his unwelcome. "You've changed sides, Katherine Mortenhoe. People don't give lifts to the likes of you and me. We're idle and oversexed. And we smell." He stood up. "We walk as far as we can. And then we look for somewhere warm and cozy like a bus shelter."

"If a bus shelter, why not a bus?"

"No more Benefit for four days and fifty miles. We're Transients. Do the sum yourself."

She did the sum. "All right, so we walk."

He took her holdall from her and she didn't protest, and they set off. Cars passed them in clumps, let through by the marchers. Going the other way the road was solid with machinery, inching forward, transmissions whining.

"Do we have to walk here?" Katherine said.

"It's the quickest way."

"Where to? Where are we going to?"

"Out of town. You said you wanted to get out of town."

She didn't ask him what they would do when they got where they were going, when they got *out of town*. Her plan had been no plan at all: a cozy barn, a cave in a hillside, a woody bower, a Keatsian dream, a nowhere. They walked on. She noticed Rod would remember to limp, and then forget. Somehow, everything was going to turn out all right.

"Last night," she said suddenly, "when you saw who I was, what did you think?"

"You mean, did I judge you?"

Of course, his sort—her sort now—didn't judge. "No, I mean how did you work out what had happened?"

"I'd seen the papers. It made sense."

"Didn't you even blame me for taking all the money?"

"Let's say I was surprised."

She wasn't getting anywhere. But she needed an attitude. Attitudes located her thoughts as clocks located her actions. "Desperate situations breed desperate measures," she said.

"Not always. Mostly desperate situations breed simple despair."

She had thought that it was she who was leading, appraising him. Now it seemed that the situation might be the other way around. And she wasn't yet ready. She lapsed into silence. The clogs made her feet ache.

"This thing you've got," he said cheerfully, "how long d'you think it'll let you keep mobile?"

"I've no idea." Only she, in her thoughts, was allowed to be so direct. "Long enough. Longer than you'll be around to see."

He didn't argue, though she wanted him to. "If you're not to end up in the hospital you'll have to be careful. Maybe a fringie commune'd be the thing. They'd never tell on you."

She shook her head. She'd thought of that and rejected it. She noticed that he spoke as if he too were not really one of the Fringe People. "Who are you, Rod?"

"You mean, what am I? I'm nobody's nobody." He laughed. "Fringe of the fringe, that's me."

She wondered if it was fair to say she'd meant *what* rather than *who*. Certainly turning her question like that made it easier to answer. He seemed, she thought, to want to be truthful. "I don't think a commune would do," she said. "I'm looking for peace, you see."

"I beg your pardon?"

He stopped walking, and turned, and stared at her. She stared back, her head on one side, frowning slightly. "I'm looking for peace." He looked down at her hands, fidgeting with her plaited hair belt. She was sure he'd heard her the first time. "I suppose you think that's naïve of me."

"Not really. Communes are peaceful. That's their whole point."

"I visited one yesterday. I got these clothes there. And it wasn't peaceful."

"You were an outsider."

I *am* an outsider, everybody's outsider. . . . But she didn't say it. If there was one thing she hated, it was people who thought and talked about nothing but their health. Instead she shrugged, and said, "All the same . . ." and started walking again.

They walked on through the morning, sometimes quiet and sometimes talking, but never about very much. Even under the gray sky, down the hideous, endless road, Katherine found the walk pleasant. She was free. Her strange companion asked nothing of her. His presence was casual: even his help, carrying her holdall, made no demands. She could accept, and give nothing in return, or reject and receive nothing in return. She had never before been so safe, safe in the moment. She was free.

They stopped at a café and ate very cheaply. She found she was free of something else—of worry about the food she ate, the unhealthy additives, the low vitamin content. If she was going to die of anything, it wouldn't be malnutrition.

They walked on. Katherine had never understood the size of the outer city. Lines of shops, housing estates, garages, industrial estates, garages, schools and leisure centers, garages, lines of shops again. The shops were all that was left of little village centers. After five hours of walking, open country was still as unimaginable as it had ever been. Maybe

fifteen miles—in Harry's motorcar ten minutes of flicking lamp standards and the back of the car in front. Ground you never walked over was unreal, bearable.

Their stops grew more frequent. Her tiredness became a sickness in her bones. She ceased to care. She pee'd on the verge where she sat. The fume-poisoned grass prickled her. But at least she still pee'd when she chose to pee, and didn't when she didn't. Rod stood with his back to her, tactfully watching the passing cars.

Suddenly one of these burned to a halt, reversed back along the hard shoulder, wound down a window, showed itself to contain a human being.

"Want a lift?"

She stood up, easing her panties up under her robes. Rod went forward to the curb. "Where to?" he asked. She didn't hear the answer. Rod came back to where she was standing: "Ten miles on, then he turns off for Fairhills. What d'you think?"

She nodded. Ten miles on were ten miles on. And it was beginning to rain. "He smiles too much," Rod said. "But I expect I can manage him."

They got into the back seat of the car. The man was small and neat, with crinkly gray hair. Expensive.

"Thank you very much," Katherine said.

"My pleasure. No day to be on the road."

They drove off. Katherine sat back and closed her eyes. Rod and the expensive man made sort of conversation.

"Nice car."

"I'm glad you like it. Are you going far?"

"Far enough."

"I'm sorry—silly question. . . . You know, I've really got a lot of sympathy with you people."

"You must have. You picked us up."

"Surely, surely. . . ."

Katherine was warm for the first time in hours, and slightly light-headed. The expensive man had an expensive car, big and very comfortable. She dozed.

". . . Of course, I give lifts to all sorts. Try not to be bigoted. I mean, everyone's got a point of view, and I like to hear it."

"Point of view about what?"

"Anything at all, John. Anything at all . . . I keep an

open house. Keep an open mind as well. Quite a little *group*. You know?"

"I don't think I do."

"Discussions. Shared experiences. Nothing too earnest, of course. But there's nobody you can't learn *something* from. Funny thing, actually, meeting you two like this. I was just—"

"I'm afraid we can't. It's very good of you, but we must—"

"Hold hard, John. What's this, then?"

"You were going to ask us back to wherever you have your *groups*."

"My home. Well, perhaps I was. But not just like that. Social intercourse needs lubrication. It needs—"

"Yours may. Ours doesn't."

"Besides, you make the suggestion sound faintly sinister." He broke off. "Is your lady ill?" he said.

Katherine opened her eyes, met his in the mirror. The eyebrows above them were raised sympathetically. "Me? I'm fine. Tired, that's all," and she stretched untidily, fringily, feeling her bones crack.

"The man wants us to go home with him," Rod said.

"There'll be others there, my dear. My wife, of course. We have quite a little circle."

"They have quite a little circle."

She wondered why Rod was being so rude. The man might be silly, but he was almost certainly very rich. Readily to accept coldness and wetness and hunger by an urban thruway seemed to her verging on the vulgar. "Do we get to stay the night?" she said, uncaringly, as she had stretched.

"I've told him we have to get on, Sarah." She wagged her wrists at him as she stayed stretched, thinking how clever he was to remember. "We've got a long way to go."

"We have?"

"I thought we had."

The expensive man looked at her again in the mirror. "The lady's tired, John. Surely you can both stay the night. Surely . . ."

It was no use fighting it. I watched the rain beating on the windshield and imagined Katherine and myself out in it. The bus shelter had been a spur-of-the-moment improvisation: thruways didn't have any, and sooner or later she would have noticed. Now she was warm and dry and, with

any luck, would stay that way till morning. Admittedly it had been the quickest pickup in the business. But I'd had a good day with Katherine, some gut-tearing shots and appealing quotes, and I reckoned I could look after her. It wasn't as if either of us had anything really to fear from our smiley friend. An earnest wife going in for contact sessions and a few pot-happy Sunday afternoon executive friends, if I knew the scene.

At the big Fairhills intersection he turned the car off to the left and we began to climb a winding road that was screened from the pervading housing estates by high evergreen hedges. There should have been a lodge, and a serf touching his forelock. At the top the hedges separated to enclose the crests of two connected hills on which were built possibly a dozen large, beautiful houses. They were beautiful individually, and together formed a beautiful whole. You tended to forget that, given enough money, beauty was still possible. Among the houses, undisturbed on the exact top of the higher hill, stood one of those isolated clusters of ancient elms that only England seems to go in for, sad and fine and precise even against the rain-blurred sky. The city around was under mist, with only point blocks and the black lump of the castle showing, and away to the west other hills that were surely country.

At first, driving along the thruway, I'd been amused that two people as rich as Katherine Mortenhoe and myself should be accepting charitable—and slightly sinister—beds for the night. Now I saw that our smiley friend's wealth made ours look like chicken-pickings. The thought, while salutary, did nothing to dispel my misgivings. Great wealth seldom sits easily on its possessors.

Since leaving the thruway our host had been silent, as if, having got what he wanted, his bright chat was no longer necessary. I glanced at Katherine: she seemed to have dozed off again. Evidently she was no great walker. Not that this either surprised or worried me—after tonight, when the first of her programs went out, if our darling public spotted us by the roadside we'd be mobbed anyway. My problem—so far unsolved—was to keep her out of sight without appearing to do so. That was why I'd suggested the commune: fringies rejected the media more or less as an article of faith. I was still hoping to bring her around to the idea of a nice, peaceful fringie commune.

We drove around the service road and down a sudden tunnel into a large garage and workshop under one of the fancier houses. Lights came on. While our host was fussing with the automatic transmission I counted seven other desirable motorcars, registration numbers CAR 1-8, with 6 missing. I was willing to bet that we were sitting in CAR 6. Suddenly I knew the identity of our smiley friend, and I was appalled.

We reversed into a space. He turned to look at us. "I make myself poor," he said, "by making my wants simply enormous."

A man who had read—and no doubt despised—his Emerson. But he'd given me my opening. "You'll never manage it, Mr. Rondavel," I said. "Not this side of the telly heaven."

"Please." He held up a hand in gentle protest. "No shop talk on Sunday. I work a five-day week as it is. In this house no one mentions television on pain of instant excommunication."

He smiled, this time giving us the benefit of the full thirty-two. "You spotted the cars, of course. I should never have given that interview. Vanity, vanity, all is vanity. . . ."

A literary gent. I let him think it was the interview. In point of fact, most people at NTV House were aware of the chairman's little vulgarities. His eight cars and his eight bits of fluff all called Margaret. We'd never met, of course. If he knew of me at all it was as a figure on his capital expenditures sheet. And he wasn't one to have his picture hanging in every office. All the same, I had to contrive an opportunity to make myself known, before the visit got out of hand. There are things it is better for a man not to know about his ultimate employer.

At that moment Katherine woke up. "We've arrived," she announced, pushing up her goggles and rubbing her eyes. Rondavel had turned away and was getting out of the car. He began to walk away. Evidently Katherine was no longer the sort of woman expensive men opened doors for. I opened the car door instead, and helped her out.

We stumbled after him, stiff from our walk and sudden short rest, to a walnut and beveled-glass elevator, reproduction 1930's. He waited for me to hump in my duffle bag and Katherine's holdall. "You mustn't mind if things seem a bit *decayed* upstairs. That's Sunday afternoon for you. They'll brighten up astoundingly later on."

Which was what, now more than ever, I was afraid of. I tried desperately to think of a way of getting him on my own. He pushed the second floor button and turned to Katherine. "An overdue introduction, I think. . . . You, my dear, are Sarah, I believe. You must call me Coryton."

He held out a hand which she shook. Coryton Ansford Rondavel . . . I wondereed if men had names like that before they became millionaires, or if the names grew on them afterward. Possibly naming your son Coryton Ansford was one way of instilling the vital millionaire's spark. In that case I'd failed poor Roddie Two badly.

"And you, John, what do they call you? Do you answer to 'Hi,' or any such cry?"

"I usually notice when I'm being spoken to."

I had Katherine's view of me to think of. And he could hardly expect manners from a fringie pickup. The elevator rose, and stopped. And there we were, John and Sarah, complete with luggage, and Coryton Ansford Rondavel, complete with smile, ready to meet our joint fates on the second floor of a nameless house somewhere in Fairhills. There was the sound of distant music, either hi-fi or someone extremely good on a synthetizer. Rondavel led us out onto a mirrored landing, opened a door, gestured.

"I must go and change," he said. "You'll find everything you want in there."

The mirrors showed me us. Beside Rondavel, on his beige carpet, against his chaste silver furnishings, we might just as well have been daubed hottentots. We had to get out. I let Katherine go on in to the room he had indicated, and then followed him to his own door. Once I got the real interview over I had no doubt at all he would agree. We *had* to go.

"Mr. Rondavel," I said, "there's something you—"

"Later." He closed the door in my face. After a moment it opened again, three inches. "And the name's Coryton."

The door closed and stayed closed. Disliking the silent corridor, I went back to Katherine.

The room was a sort of bathroom, but with a squashy black velvet settee, various luscious chairs, an elaborate ebony drinks dispenser, and, as outside on the landing, a great many mirrors. Now, mirrors in a bathroom—other than the basic one over the washbasin—make me feel uneasy. Images linger in them. Salacious images. No doubt I've

a nasty dirty mind. Be that as it may, that bathroom, squashy settee, mirrors and all, was the nastiest, dirtiest bathroom I'd ever seen.

"Come on," I said. "Let's get out of here."

Katherine had her hat and goggles off and was peering at herself in one of the mirrors. Her survival jacket was thrown over the back of a chair. "It's raining," she said. "And he only wants to sleep with me."

Which was a nice way of putting it. "Or with me," I said.

"So? If you can cope, I'm sure I can." She peered more closely at her reflection. "Those goggles seem to boil my eyes. The skin's all wet and wrinkly."

"Katherine—I don't think you know what his sort of person can be like."

"You mean he's a crazy goggles fetishist?"

"I'm serious, Katherine."

"And I'm warm and dry and likely to be fed. Sometimes that's what life comes down to."

Apart from anything else, every minute we spent in Coryton Rondavel's house was wasted footage. But I knew I wouldn't shift her. I watched her slip her goggles on again and cram the sou'wester down over her ears. Perhaps with them on anything could happen because she wasn't really there. The room was so hot that I removed my two sweaters, still watching her. She'd begun to pull hair down from under the sou'wester in a straggly fringe over what could be seen of her forehead. I went away into the lav, closing the door firmly behind me. I'd suddenly thought of another thing I didn't like about mirrors: in my experience they had a nasty habit of being one-way.

When I came out Katherine was lying on the squashy settee, apparently asleep again. The easy way she slept taunted me. With the dubious jollities of the coming evening to be coped with I couldn't even risk one of my relaxants. I propped myself up in one of the chairs. . . . Had Rondavel meant it when he said TV was taboo in his house? Or would he set orgies aside and gather us all at eight-thirty sharp for the first of his company's new Human Destiny shows? What would I do then? And what, come to that, about the problems of the morrow?

Deceiving Katherine, keeping her away from the media, had seemed simple enough in Vincent's office. Play it by

ear, he'd said. . . . I was listening hard, not hearing a damn thing.

But we had a considerate host, and he didn't keep us waiting long. "There's a complicated story," he said, arriving in a flurry of orange brocade, "about a royal banquet where the guest of honor, not used to such occasions, drank the water in his finger bowl. The king, it is said, had the royal good manners to put his guest at his ease by doing the same. Personally, I think it was just something thoroughly naughty he'd wanted to do all his life."

Possibly the history lesson was intended to explain, or to ease the shock of, our host's costume. It didn't. He was dressed like the original Arabian Nights—or perhaps like one of the Three Kings in a school charade. Except that the gold and the jewels and the ermine were real. It was a getup straight out of the dressing-up basket in some oil sheik's family nursery.

To neither the anecdote nor the apparition could I think of any satisfactory response. Katherine, having woken up halfway through both, was even worse off. "My feet hurt," she said.

(This wasn't quite the non sequitur it seemed, for she was in fact apologizing for having dirtied our host's squashy settee. But he hadn't, anyway, heard her.)

"Klutzy?" he said, revolving. "Real klutzy?" He primped, as if Klutzy meant camp, which it never had. Then he abandoned his display, casually, like a ballerina coming down off her points. "An open mind, you know. Feeling right and looking right is half the battle. If John would like something a little more . . . exuberant, I'm sure we can oblige."

"Maybe I don't feel exuberant."

He refused to be put down. "I think you're right. I think you'll rave them best the way you are."

I touched my shirt buttons, making sure they were done up right to the neck. The time for making myself known to my company chairman was long past. And if his friends were to be raved, they'd have to make it without the help of my nipples. He turned to Katherine. "If you're rested now, we'll go on down."

We went.

He'd said we might find things a bit decayed. Presumably he'd meant people. The ground floor living area—I never quite know what to call these multileveled expanses of knee-

deep carpeting and kinetic art the rich go in for—was littered with sprawling, pot-happy freaks. Or rather, since I recognized several of the faces, littered with normal, establishment people who were working quite hard at being sprawling, pot-happy freaks. It was all depressingly what I had expected.

Apart from us, the only animated guest at the party was a young man, dressed totally in black, who sat drooped over the synthetizer console producing surprisingly ordered free association stuff. He ignored us.

"Don't mind him," Rondavel said. "He's on his own out. All that's left is a little psycho-motor in the fingers."

He led the way between amoebic mounds of translucent upholstery, stepping over spilled legs and arms and exotic drapery. I nudged Katherine. "Weekend fringies," I murmured. "Most of the vices and none of the virtues."

She nodded, and drew her skirts closely about her ankles.

"You must excuse us," Rondavel said, at least having the sense to hand us food rather than drinks from the main service unit. "We do tend to go rather overboard at these little gatherings. Myself, I neutralized, then split for a touch of the realities. You know? . . . No objection to hoof beef, I take it?"

I accepted the condescension. As a fringie I wouldn't have touched nonanalogue meat in years. Katherine had already bolted hers, and was being offered more. The room was ridiculous, like some bad director's idea of after-the-orgy. No doubt that was where they'd got it from.

"We're very innocent," Rondavel said, astutely reading my thoughts. "We try for the best of both worlds. I suppose you despise us."

Tolerance was the prime fringie thing. I smiled. "You do what you do. It's not what I do. It's a fragmentation. But who's counting?"

"You are, John. I know you are." He was working himself up. "You disapprove. I can see you do. You come in here radiating disapproval. You have this terrible reverse snobbery about the rich. You sit up on your high moral mountain, and—"

"We'd better go." But I had little hope. Maybe this was why he'd brought us here, to talk about his guilts.

We glared at each other, neither moving. Katherine yawned, saved us. "It's all so boring. . . ." She took another slice of beef. "We use each other. People always do. Let's

agree on that and then get on with . . . whatever's got to be got on with."

It wasn't mainstream fringie, but it shut him up. He relaxed, went around prodding people gently with his Turkish-slippered foot. They roused, scratched themselves, farted, giggled. Rich or poor, the human body never let up on you.

"Visitors, my children. Bestir yourselves. Waifs of the storm. Interrupted on the long journey from nowhere to nowhere. Before your very eyes. Kindly here to give us of their wisdom."

If he was mocking himself, he was mocking us also. We stood, and munched our hoof beef, and waited.

"Don't take any notice of Corry. The clothes go to his head. I'm Margaret."

We introduced ourselves, nonintroduced ourselves. Behind her klutzy sunglasses this particular Margaret was a singularly beautiful young woman. "I'm so glad you could come." Me, I looked around for the cucumber sandwiches. "Corry doesn't mean to insult you—he's just embarrassed. I expect you are too."

"Not us," said Katherine. "We have this built-in superiority thing. It's so restful. In a world where everybody believed themselves superior there'd be no more wars."

She was really doing extraordinarily well. Of course, I should have known she would. Margaret laughed. "Does that work between men and women too?"

"More than ever. I know I'm superior to John here, and he—poor fool—believes he's superior to me. That's why we get on so well."

Another woman, intense, aware of her overlarge teeth, joined us. "But who," she said, stretching her upper lip, "who gets on who? That's what I want to know."

And there we were, in thirty seconds flat, talking about sex. If it wasn't drugs with us fringies, it was sex. No wonder we were envied.

"Please, no mechanics," said Margaret quickly. "It's far too early in the day for that."

The woman took her teeth away, disappointed.

Katherine knew she was going out of her mind. She heard herself saying things she detested, impossible things. And laughing. Laughing. . . . In this room she was as much on show as if she had been in front of Vincent Ferriman's

cameras. And she was, or a part of her was, a part of her certainly was enjoying it. Because it was a performance, perhaps. A lie. She who had planned to escape into truth, was enjoying the lie.

She felt as if time were reeling past her: hours, days, weeks, speeded up into computer chatter. She struggled to catch at it, understanding for the first time truly what was the matter with her. There was logic and anti-logic, sequence and anti-sequence, phase and anti-phase. The curve was exponential. They were burning her up. She knew she was going out of her mind. And enjoying it.

People peered into her face, terrible gaudy people. Sometimes she heard them. "Society is corrupt. Is that why you don't mind living off it?"

"Corrpution isn't a bad thing. Look in your dictionary. Out of corruption grow the most beautiful lilies."

"That sounds like the Bible— Consider the lilies of the field."

"I don't know. I've only just thought of it. Perhaps they weren't the same lilies."

Laughing. Laughing. Her answers were as silly as the questions. Sometimes she simply walked among the terrified, terrifying people, and murmured "Care."

She was given things to eat, and ate them. She was given things to drink, and drank them.

The places where she stood were sometimes very bright and sometimes very dark. There was music, and the people danced shapelessly. Compositions of tiny mirrors flashed, pricking her skin. They were burning her up. She stopped hearing the questions, stopped hearing everything but the music and the mirrors. The people retreated: she caught hold of them and still they retreated. They laughed as she ran among them, catching at their silks and burlap. They retreated, cloth coming away in her hands. They danced and laughed, not she but they, naked, and a path led away between them, up steps, through music, across aeons of crimson to Rod, tiny in the distance, growing as she ran.

She reached him, held him close, felt him drift out of her arms like smoke. But the path had closed behind her and he was there, still there. Still. There. Rod. A rod of iron. A rod for her own back. A rod. . . . She clutched at his arms, his waist, his smoky thighs. Around her people cheered silently, huge mouths over juddering pink and orange and blue. This,

she knew, was no longer a lie. He was angry, arguing, shaking his head, shaking his head, shaking her head.

Cold now, her face against his smoky thighs, and sweating, she waited. She could feel his vehemence, his refusal. She waited. And the mouths gaped.

They took her away from him. There was a machine on huge silent wheels, smooth and beautiful. They placed it beside her, around her. She marveled, no longer afraid, at the terrible playthings of the rich. There was sex in the air, in the smooth and beautiful maneuvering of the machine. It took her up with a sigh. Rod was held far away, watching, gaping. The noises burst in on her, wordless, only to fade to a sudden quiet, with just the thin thread of music and the breath of the machine in her face. She didn't struggle. The movement in her body wasn't painful, only dry and wearisome. She looked out, past the machine, at Rod where he stood in the shifting flakes of light. His mouth was closed, and there were tears on his cheeks.

Later, except for him and her, the rooms were quite empty. She sat up. Incredibly, he had found a TV set and was watching it. Yards away, past hideous, lumpy somethings his face was lit by the purplish TV glow. She stared around: the place was a huge, idiotic shambles. Anybody could hang mirrors on plastic threads and twiddle them. Anybody could trundle in machines and out again. Anybody could blow up plastic bags and call them furniture.

He heard her move and quickly turned off the set. He looked up at her from the upholstered hollow in which he was sprawling. In the houses of the rich, apparently, nobody was expected to sit. "Feeling better?"

He didn't attempt to come to her. She shook her head. "Not much."

"Didn't your mother ever tell you not to accept lifts from strangers?"

"Which mother?"

She could be as clever as he, say as little, wait.

"I reckon they spiked your drinks. How much do you remember?"

Then she did remember. Coldly she thrust her clothes down between her legs. "I was raped," she said.

"No—" He heaved himself up. "That was what they wanted. Something of the sort. But—"

"Do you think I don't know?"

"They went away. I swear it. Sidled out like a bunch of naughty children."

"Do you think I don't know?"

He hurried to her, tried to take her hand. But she hid it away. "Believe me, Katherine. When it came to it, there wasn't a man who would. That's the truth."

"But the machine . . ."

"They spiked your drink. You were confused."

She remembered the breath in her face, the dry ache. "Where are they now?"

He shrugged. "It's a big house. And there's always next door. They're all pals up here on Fairhills."

"How long have I been—?"

"Not more than an hour. I tell you, Katherine, they spiked your drink."

She shook her head, remembering the breath in her face. But she didn't want to talk about it. "How much do you know about computers?" she said instead.

"Me, I don't even know about people. When I refused them their peep-show they got real mad. I'd've said they were all set to hurt someone. But—"

"I have a theory about computers. You see, they don't have self-knowledge. On a fundamental level there's no feedback. Otherwise it'd be like an audio system. If a microphone hears what it transmits, it transmits what it hears. Louder and louder till something breaks."

"Katherine, I wish I knew what the hell you're talking about."

"I'm a bit more than a computer, Rod. I have self-knowledge. I understand what I know what I know what I understand."

"So do we all."

"But you're not dying of it. I am." She let him take her hand. She dared, in the dark and secret, no-place room, dared tell him anything. "So I've been warned what to expect. Louder and louder till something breaks."

"Louder? When you say louder, do you really mean faster?"

She took off her goggles, leaned back, closed her eyes. It was good that he should understand. She remembered breath in her face where he said there'd been none. She remembered the dry pushing between her legs where he said there wasn't a man who would. She believed him. And the wheels

of the machine, the smooth and beautiful machine, would have left lines in the thick red pile of the carpet. . . . She felt a rigor coming, and dismissed it as hysteria, mere wishful thinking. Rather this than Lord of Upper Egypt: rigor, paralysis, sweating, coordination loss, double vision, incontinence, hallucination, breakdown of . . . It was untidy to have missed out on the incontinence, untidy not to have every symptom every time. But clearly her twenty-four days were down to less, to ten, or six, or three, or two.

"Rod? What peep-show did you refuse them, Rod?"

He squeezed her hand. "It doesn't matter. They didn't get it. It doesn't matter."

Her fingers were huge and swollen, so that they rubbed together like sausages where he held them. "I've got to get old," she said. "There's . . . so much I've got to understand."

"So have we all."

"Does it sound such pious bullshit the way *I* say it?"

"It doesn't sound pious bullshit at all."

"Oh Lord. . . ." Her mind was wandering off, meeting the rigor halfway. "The thing is . . . we expect the impossible. We always expect things to have to *mean* something."

"And don't they?"

"Poor Rod, of course they don't. Just . . . circuits."

He sat beside her for a long time. Somewhere in the dark velvet spaces of the room a clock struck midnight. The sculptures turned and flittered. He sat beside her through the rigor and the paralysis, and beyond. Finally she slept.

SEVEN *Monday*

When Dawlish, the monitoring engineer, finally got through to Vincent he was in his dressing gown, pouring the last of the brandy, preparing for bed. Vincent had had a busy Sunday, knocking Roddie's accumulated footage into shape for the evening transmission. Running it at thirty minutes—twenty-seven with commercials—they had plenty of good stuff left, possibly to plug gaps with later on.

Judging from the switchboard's reports, the show's reception had been mixed. He wasn't worried—reaction to something new was always cautious. They'd looked, and they'd look again. At this stage he asked for nothing more. Harry'd been on the phone, of course, just to say how pleased he was everything was going so nicely. His wife looked surprisingly well, he thought.

Vincent had watched the transmission alone, and then settled down to unwind with a bottle before going early to bed. He had a wife, too, but they seldom met. Mostly he lived in a suite at the top of NTV House.

He listened carefully to what Dawlish had to say, thanked him for thinking to keep him informed (he was good with subordinates), and said he'd be down at once. In fact it took him ten minutes to get down to the monitoring room. He had shaved first, and put on a clean shirt and a sharp check tie. No problem looked so bad if you weren't yourself shop-soiled.

". . . Rod. I have self-knowledge. I understand what I know what I know what I understand."

And on the screen, Katherine Mortenhoe, wearing her ridiculous goggles.

"What's that supposed to mean? Eh?"

The monitoring engineer sighed. "Looks like she's gone round the bend, sir."

Vincent peered at the screen, wishing Roddie'd give him a half-shot, some idea of what was going on. "How long have they been in Rondavel's house?"

"Since about seven, sir."

"Why the hell wasn't I called earlier?"

Roddie's voice: *"Louder? When you say louder, do you really mean faster?"*

"Well? Turn that bloody thing down. Why wasn't I called sooner?"

"I've . . . only just come on duty, sir. Mr. Simpson probably thought—"

"I see. You're Dawlish, aren't you?"

The man nodded, straightened his white coat at being recognized.

"Well, Dawlish, I'm glad someone in the department uses his head. What's been happening?"

"Quite a lot, sir, one way and another. I've been re-running the tapes. I'm afraid they're pretty hot."

"The chairman's no angel, Dawlish. We all know that. And I'm sure I can rely on your discretion."

"Of course, Mr. Ferriman."

Dawlish brought out the pompous in him. He could scarcely believe there were Dawlishes left—he'd thought one of the last had been his house master. . . . On the screen Katherine Mortenhoe appeared to be asleep. The picture crept away from her, around acres of typical *dolce vita* decor. Vincent could hardly credit it. The designer had done exactly the same for him once, on a drama one-shot. He wondered if the chairman knew.

The picture returned to Katherine, catching her face as she said something. Evidently they were alone.

"On the phone you said they'd not been rumbled, Dawlish. Are you sure of that?"

"There's a sequence here, sir. The chairman wants a sort of show, sir. He wants to see how fringies . . . er . . . copulate. That's why I don't think they've been rumbled, Mr. Ferriman."

"Tell me, Dawlish, does your wife know you get to watch this sort of thing?" Dawlish smiled, man to man. "Right. Now I'd better see this thing right from square one. Oh, and while it's running, you tell the switchboard to get me Dr. Mason. *Mason*—they have his number. Ask him to come over straight away. I may be going to need his advice."

Dawlish warmed up another monitor. On it Vincent watched Katherine Mortenhoe past—the car ride, the garage, the elevator, the bathroom—while beside her on the first screen Katherine Mortenhoe present juddered her way through her sad affliction, and slept, and midnight came and went.

Dr. Mason was hardly svelte. Both he and his clothes looked as if neither had rested for a long time. Possibly since the previous Tuesday. He entered, sat, stared; painfully, synthetically awake. Vincent foresaw trouble.

"Ah, Mason, what kept you? We've got a trauma here. Sex and all that. I'll do a rerun."

Mason held up one finger, listening. Katherine Mortenhoe past was talking about computers. He frowned, looking from monitor to monitor, guessing which was which. " . . . *They don't have self-knowledge. On a fundamental level there's no feedback. Otherwise it'd be like an audio system. If a microphone hears what it transmits, it transmits what it hears. Louder and louder till something breaks.*"

"She's out of her tiny mind," Vincent said. Dr. Mason reached for a jotter, started making notes.

"I'm a bit more than a computer, Rod. I have self-knowledge. I understand what I know what I know what I understand."

"Heebie-jeebie talk," said Vincent. Dr. Mason hushed him.

"But you're not dying of it. I am. . . . So I've been warned what to expect. Louder and louder till something breaks."

"Louder? When you say louder, do you really mean faster?"

"Utter heebie-jeebie talk," said Vincent. "I'll do you a rerun. You ought to see the buildup."

Dr. Mason shook his head. "It's not heebie-jeebie talk. She's being obscure because it's safer. And your man's following her. Klausen would be very pleased."

"But I want to show you the buildup."

"It's not necessary. Obviously my computer nonsense is running away with her. We must pull them in before it's too late."

Katherine Mortenhoe past stirred and opened her eyes. *"Rod? What peep-show did you refuse them, Rod?"*

"Pull them in? You must be joking."

"If you don't I won't be responsible for the consequences."

"Don't be melodramatic. We both know there's nothing whatever the matter with her."

"I've got to get old. There's . . . so much I've got to understand."

Mason groaned, leaned forward, convulsively turned off the monitor, covered his eyes. "She needed something she could uderstand, feel sympathy for. God help me, I gave it to her."

"All right, so you did a good job. That doesn't mean we get—"

"You must pull them in." Now he was clutching Vincent's arm. "Don't you understand? The Syndrome was there ready-made, so I used it. But the computer analogy was too close. Possibly the outrage too. We were playing with fire. If we don't pull her in I'm telling you she'll die."

"Then she really is out of her tiny mind."

"Suggestible. Hysterical, if you like. That's one of the reasons why we chose her. But certainly not mad."

Vincent removed the doctor's hand from his arm and carefully took out one of his cigars. It would put him ahead of his daily ration, but he lit it all the same. He was bigger than daily rations.

"My dear fellow, this operation's cost money. Your own fee wasn't exactly peanuts. And now you say pull them in."

"I'm a lost soul. And I say pull them in."

Vincent winced delicately. "It's late, my dear fellow, and you're upset. Besides, you're forgetting—out there is the best research opportunity you'll ever have."

He pointed at Katherine Mortenhoe present, whimpering faintly in her sleep. Dr. Mason's teeth appeared to chatter slightly. "That's what you told me. You also told me there was no question of letting her die."

"That's right. An upbeat ending. A miracle cure."

"Money in the bank, Mr. Ferriman. Nothing but that."

Vincent stared thoughtfully at the sleeping Katherine Mortenhoe. There were points he could make. *Mea culpa* was all very well, but the doctor had been paid in advance: his own fee depended on ratings, and on the show's continuance. Then again, there were artistic reputations at stake here: his own and poor Roddie's. Furthermore, it was easy —and meaningless—to deny responsibility: there were still no positive steps Mason could take without disclosing his own somewhat unethical part in the proceedings. And Mason

was surely no crusader. Unless . . . Vincent glanced sideways: in his present condition the doctor was conceivably capable of even that. But he wouldn't want to, and he'd welcome a convenient compromise.

"How long d'you think she's got?" Vincent asked, very gently.

"Impossible to say. The snowball effect. She believes it's running away with her, so of course it is."

"Today? Tomorrow? Surely longer than that?"

"Probably."

"Then I tell you what I'll do. You move in here, keep a professional eye on things. I'll tell Dawlish to give you full facilities. We'll keep a helicopter on standby and the minute you think she's in serious danger we'll buzz on over. Flying doctor, nick of time, wonderful stuff . . . how's that, then?"

Dr. Mason was silent. Vincent knew his man, recognized agreement, capitulation, self-distaste. Crusaders were a dying lot.

On the screen Katherine Mortenhoe had suddenly disappeared. The camera was on the move. Dim expensive furniture loomed by, a door swinging open, a bright corridor. "What's happening?" Dr. Mason asked.

Vincent was glad of the distraction. "Roddie's left her sleeping. I expect he's going for a pee."

"Do we have to watch?"

"Don't tell me you're shy, Doctor."

The screen centered on an elevator button, a thumb, sliding doors, a panel of buttons, the same thumb, a close steady view of walnut paneling. Then the doors as they slid back, another bright corridor, a view in mirrors of Roddie walking past, pausing to stare at himself, evidently incredulous, then on down the corridor, trying doors, looking into bedrooms.

"He's obviously alone," said Dr. Mason. "Why doesn't he tell us what he's doing?"

"We decided it was seldom worth the risk. Besides, it's after one. He'd hardly expect anyone except the duty engineer to be watching."

On the screen a woman's bedroom, a quick pan around furniture, dark green with tiny golden stars, dull golden bed cover, on then to a wall-long closet. Clothes roughly sorted, armfuls of them grabbed, the cover off the bed, the pillows. Rushing now, hunting in drawers. . . .

In the viewing room, above the rustle of fabrics, the rattle of drawer runners, Vincent became aware of an insistent little tapping on the door. He called—not irritably, he was never irritable—and Dawlish came in. "There's a lady to see you, Mr. Ferriman."

"A lady? At this time of night? Who let her up?"

"It's Mr. Rodericks's wife, sir. His ex-wife, that is."

"Tracey . . . ? All right, I'll come." He left Dr. Mason watching, fascinated, as the search in the bedroom continued. Television did that for you, took your mind off things.

Dawlish had put Tracey in one of the interviewing rooms. Although she couldn't have been waiting many minutes there were already two cigarettes scrubbed out in the ashtray. She was lighting a third as Vincent entered.

"I tried to call you, but the exchange wouldn't put me through. So I came."

"They have their instructions. Outside calls are—"

"I'd have thought I might expect something better."

He spread his hands apologetically, wondering why it was so hard for some ex-wives to let go. "You saw the show?" he said.

"I saw the show."

She stared at him through her cigarette smoke and he smiled at her encouragingly. If he wasn't careful he was going to be told that, before knowing him, Roddie had been a fairly sensitive, decent human being.

"You know, don't you, that before Roddie got to know you he was a fairly sensitive, decent human being?"

"Tracey, my dear, we've been through this before. Many times."

"And we'll go through it again, just once more."

"It's late, Tracey. Couldn't we—"

"Don't I know it's late? Too goddamned late. . . . You've destroyed him, Vincent. Chewed him up, spat him out, destroyed him."

"You're entitled to your opinion. I don't think he'd agree with you."

"Maybe he thinks he's still fighting. Did you know he came to see me?"

"We had the tape." Then he felt guilty for scoring so crudely. "I . . . I didn't see it. And the sound was missing."

"I'm sorry. I wish you had. I wish there'd been sound too. Then you'd have understood."

"The new show's upset you."

"The new show? Or the new technique? The new, wonder-miracle, electro-neurological technique. In an age of achievements, the latest and the greatest. The Man with the TV Eyes."

She was quoting, of course. It was cheap copy, but Vincent wouldn't disown it. "He didn't tell you?"

"You're fucking right he didn't tell me. He was too fucking ashamed."

He stood up. "This is a pointless and unpleasant interview. If—"

"Have you thought what I'm to tell his son? That his dad's the Man with the TV Eyes? The man who sold every farthest corner of himself to the square-eyed monster?"

It was a night for people to splash their souls all over him. "Roddie Two's growing up in a new world, Tracey. These old-fashioned emotive phrases will mean nothing to him."

"Maybe you're right at that. Maybe Roddie Two's new world will see the justice. A fable for our time, Vincent. The only person the voyeur really hurts is himself. And of course the people who love him."

She turned her head sharply away, jerked her shoulders, drew painfully on her cigarette. Vincent waited. "I shall be interested," she said at last, "to see if anybody in this lousy world will think that what you're doing to that woman is wrong."

"Plenty will." He waved his cigar, looming over her, caricaturing the vandal she believed him to be. "Seventy-thirty against at the moment, according to the exchange. But it won't stop them looking in."

She stubbed out her cigarette and stood up also. She was, he thought, a pretty little thing, but not one of those whose tears brought out the father in him. "I must get back home now," she said. "There's a neighbor listening out."

She gathered strength, then walked to the door, using the short distance to get straight what else she had to say. Then she turned. "You've not changed. Of course you despise him. You despise everybody. You always did. What I really came to tell you was—"

Behind her the door burst open. Dawlish came in fast.

"He's asking for you, Mr. Ferriman. We said we'd fetch you. He's hanging on."

Vincent hurried across the interviewing room till Tracey blocked his path. "I came to tell you," she said, "that I'd always be around to pick up the pieces." But he had dodged past her, had not listened, had more important things to think of. "If there are any pieces," she shouted after him, down the important, dead corridor.

And watched him go, his innocent, white-coated puppy dog trotting behind. At least she had Roddie Two. She wondered what *he* had.

I hadn't expected to get through to the Presence. I'd intended to tape a message. But the sound gear had crackled and a voice had come back at me, a voice I didn't know, plummy like a stage butler, asking me to hang on. So I hung on. I sat on the seat and hung on.

No doubt there *were* other places from which I could talk to base without fear of interruption, but that night I wasn't at my most imaginative. So I gave the goggling office boys —goggling butlers?—a steady, unexciting view of an automatic roller towel. Coryton Rondavel provided contraceptives too, for the men who worked in his garage, but I kept my eyes rigorously to the front. I hoped Vincent would hurry. Much longer and Katherine would start feeling sorry for me. Such is the lingua franca of our digestive processes.

"Roddie? I ought to be very angry with you, Roddie, letting yourself be picked up by—"

"Yeah. Well, save it for later. Like the man said, listen now, and listen good. You know where I am?"

"You're at Coryton Rondavel's."

"Right. And I'm just going to steal the least swanky of Coryton Rondavel's eight swanky motorcars."

"You're what?"

"No time to argue. I'm taking one of our chairman's cars, and you're going to talk to him, and he's not going to say a thing. He can charge a rental fee to the company if he likes, but I don't think he will. Look at some of the footage I've recently turned in if you doubt me."

"I already have. We don't like the look of what's happening to La Mortenhoe."

"Me, I'm just hanging on. Maybe I can snap her out of it." Me, I didn't think so. But Vincent liked his men to

think positive. If you weren't careful, you even talked the Vincent way. Meanwhile, I was just taking each hour as it came. "Vincent? You still there?"

"I'm still here."

"Just now the house is empty. They were pretty high, so maybe they've taken their orgy somewhere else. But sooner or later they're going to come back. And sooner or later Rondavel's going to discover he's a car short. If you don't want trouble I suggest you have someone ring every ten minutes. If he gets us picked up by the police the whole thing's blown. It's a lousy assignment anyway. You hear me?"

"I hear you. But for God's sake, why a car? What—"

"You think about it. I missed the show, but I picked up some of the comments later. From now on we're hot."

"I can see that. But—"

I flushed the toilet straight through his protest. There's power for you. "I've got to go," I said. "She's been left too long as it is."

"Wait, Roddie. I've got Dr. Mason here. He—"

I cut him, and opened the door. Katherine was over where I'd left her, in the front seat of the black station wagon with the black windows. When I get an idea I really get one. The number plate—CAR 4—was a pity, but it'd take a very alert and nasty-minded cop to stop us on the off-chance.

I made my way across to the car and got in smoothly. Katherine had obviously been dozing. She roused herself. "I thought you'd left me," she said. I put my hand on her knee. "I wouldn't have blamed you," she went on. "This car business is quite crazy."

"We're together," I said. You said such things to the sick.

I'd found car keys on a row of neatly labeled hooks in a sort of chauffeur's office. It wasn't my fault that the office door had sort of busted when I sort of leaned on it. I started up, switched on the lights, and drove carefully out of the garage. Going up the ramp must have broken some sort of ray, for an alarm bell started ringing distantly in the house behind us. I slowed, making sure Vincent heard the bell.

"Don't worry," I said to him, to Katherine. "He'll think twice before he calls the police. He won't want trouble any more than we do." And a word from Vincent, dear Vincent, in his best cocktail manner, would clinch the matter.

I drove down the avenue between the high hedges, and

out onto the thruway. For a while Katherine stayed awake, watching the tarmac our lights created and let slip endlessly by. Then I reclined her seat and she slept again. I drove on through the night, not fast, taking each hour as it came.

Dawn found us maybe a hundred miles on, at about the limit—without a substation—of my transmitting range. Tied to Vincent by bonds of ether, I turned off at the next intersection and began working my way back, using country lanes. There had been few other motorists, and none of them had done other than hurtle by, rocking us with the wind of their passing. As soon as the light was strong enough I drew into a gateway by a field, switched off, and stopped. First it was very quiet. Then, as my ears adjusted, it was noisy again: noisy with the most turned-on set of birds I'd ever heard. I watched the sun come up over a stubbly, undistinguished hillside. After the house, the friends, the life, of Coryton Rondavel it was quite breathtakingly beautiful.

I got out of the car and went for a short walk. The lane dipped abruptly and came to a stream, and a narrow stone bridge. I sat on the parapet, watching a pair of moorhens. I thought about . . . nothing but the bridge and the stream and the two little birds busy in the rushes. After a time I went back to the car.

Katherine was still asleep. I'd expected to be revolted by the incontinence when it came, and certainly the smell in the enclosed car was bad. All that really worried me, though, was how degraded she'd feel when she woke. I wound down the windows, backed out into the lane, and drove slowly along to the bridge. Then I got out again, slamming the door. She opened her eyes. "There's clothes in the back," I said. "And your bath is run."

Then I went away. If Vincent wanted close-ups of her shame he could come and get them himself.

In fact she was admirably composed about the whole affair. She emerged from the car carrying a towel, underclothes, and one of Rondavel's Margaret's dresses. "You think of everything," she said. "I don't expect it'll fit, but at least it's got a fancy New York label."

Her little joke made, it was easy for me to return and help her over the fence. She slithered down the other side into the soft green water meadow. I tried to remember when she had decided to do without her goggles: if the psychiatrists were right it would mark a watershed in our relation-

ship. She laid the dress out on the grass, took off her clogs and socks and fringie outer robe, and went down the bank into the stream. It must have been cold, but she waded out all the same, and dipped herself till she was sitting.

I should have left her to wash in private. But there was an old-masterishness about the scene that I couldn't resist. The willows, and the gray lichened stones of the steep little bridge, and her robe swirling out in the water around her. Besides, our relationship had never been one of old-fashioned constrictions. To have looked away would have been a denial. We were too close, and far too wise. Not, of course, that all these complicated rationalizations went on in my head as I stood there by the bridge. I stayed because, at the time, I didn't think of not staying.

If I need further excuse, I can only say that this was obviously the way she saw it too. For she knew I was there, and she took off her robe without fuss or display, and let it float away on the current. It caught on the reeds by the bridge, then whisked free and disappeared under the low stone arch. Her underclothes followed it. . . . Now, the body of a forty-four-year-old woman is supposed not to be beautiful. Even less beautiful, therefore, the body of a frequently paralytic, hallucinating, incontinent forty-four-year-old woman suffering from a terminal syndrome. To deny this assumption is to be accused of ludicrous romanticism. Facts, after all, are facts. So I'll just claim, and be done with it, that at that time, in that place, I found the sight of Katherine Mortenhoe washing her thighs, her arms, her shoulders, her breasts, to be right. Not beautiful, perhaps, but utterly right. Which has always been, to my mind, as good a definition of beauty as you'll find.

The water bit into her, coldly purging her. Her trembling was glorious, not a rigor but her body's innocent reaction to the teeming, sunlit water. Washing herself, she noticed her brown nipples huge with the cold. She didn't hide them from the strange young man who leaned on the fence and watched. He was more than simply a man and she a woman. They were both of them human and, unreasonably, she found that somehow magnificent. To turn away would have been an insult. So she stayed in the water till she could bear the cold no longer, then waded out and climbed the

bank to where she had left the towel. She dressed, and they had breakfast sitting on the grass by the car.

It was a strange meal, stolen in a tablecloth from Coryton Rondavel's party: rye bread, smoked salmon, beef, pâté, a bottle of wine, peaches. When they had finished enough remained for lunch.

"How much money have you left?" he asked.

She fetched her handbag from the holdall in the car and counted. After the previous day's café she had only seven pounds sixty. "It doesn't matter," he said. "I've got enough to get us by."

"Did you steal some from the house?"

He hesitated, then shook his head. "I suppose it was silly, but stealing money seemed somehow wickeder. Besides, I wouldn't have known where to look."

"Then you've got money of your own? Nobody's nobody, you said. Do nobody's nobodies always have money of their own?"

"Shall we leave it?"

"But, Rod—"

"I said, shall we leave it?"

She looked at him, and left it. She smiled and shrugged, but the exclusion hurt and he knew it did. "Katherine . . ." He turned away. "Katherine, you know nothing about me. Don't expect so much. And keep your secrets."

"I have no secrets, not here, like this."

"Well, aren't you the lucky one."

He was angry now, and she didn't blame him. They weren't children, playing truth or dare. She changed the subject. "The police'll be out looking for the car," she said.

"I told you, Rondavel won't say a word. Not after last night. He won't want the publicity."

She remembered his telling her, but as if in a dream. All the time they had spent in that house had a dreamlike quality. "A twenty thousand pound car?"

"Cheap at the price."

Again things were unsaid, and again she had to press him. "You say I wasn't raped. So what happened last night? What is Mr. Rondavel so afraid of?"

"He . . . won't be quite sure. When you're high enough the distinctions blur."

"But—"

"Don't go on, Katherine. I promise you you weren't touched. So don't go on."

There was a different, a gentler exclusion here, one that didn't hurt. Not that she would have minded the details: they were obviously sexual and the drive to pleasure—no matter how devious—was universal enough. But she was willing to be spared, just because he wanted to spare her.

She watched him fold the remains of the food away in the tablecloth. Somehow his interest in her didn't fit. She didn't give him power, she didn't give him sex, even her suffering appeared to give him no kicks. It was almost as if she explained something to him, something he had been curious about all his life. Something that was its own justification. She caught herself out in her earlier sentimentality. Her nakedness had been the academic nakedness of the mortuary slab. That was why it hadn't mattered.

"Shall we go now?" He was calling her from the car. She went around and climbed in beside him.

"Go where to?"

"That's a very good question." He rummaged in the door pocket. "Ah—I didn't think Rondavel would let us down." He brought out a set of maps, found the right one, and spread it out across their knees. After a moment's searching he found where they were, the lane, the bridge, the thin blue line of the stream. "There's a commune just here," he said. "Here, on this old airfield. It can't be more than thirty miles."

"I don't want a commune."

"I know you said that. But you need a roof, and a proper bed."

"We've got the car."

"Suppose you need looking after?"

"I don't want a commune."

How could she tell him? She was not, she was not an academic nakedness. How could she tell him about her one-time list of choices, all of which—even dignity—were now irrelevant? How could she tell him she no longer needed either to think or to do, that the slush of people got in the way, that to learn to be was all she had time for? "I clean up after myself," she said. "And when I can't, you leave me."

"You know that's not what—"

"Take me to the sea, please." She pointed on the map, at

the nearby coastline. She had wished simply to shut him up, as once in a different life she had used Tasmania to shut up Harry. But as soon as she said it she knew that the sea was what she really wanted. She shouldn't have treated him like Harry. He was so much more. "Take me back," she said, hiding in a joke, "to the mother from whence I came."

He didn't laugh, but folded the map and put it away and started the car engine. Just as they were about to move off she clutched his arm. "How long have I got?" she said, scarcely audible.

"What a question. How the hell should I know?"

She was ashamed. It was a cry from the pit she thought she'd climbed out of. "Your arm," she said, "feels as thin as a piece of string." Though she knew quite well it was young and muscular.

And then, as she began to shake, she rehearsed—she thought silently—her private litany: rigor, paralysis, sweating, coordination loss, double vision, incontinence, hallucination, autonomic breakdown, anoxia, terminal phase. . . . Terminal phase was a fine and dandy euphemism—a euphemism, one might say, to end all euphemisms. A—

"I'll drive on, then, shall I?" She'd forgotten he was there, and let his arm go. "Just tell me if you want me to stop."

The car went forward, over the little bridge and on down the lane. She closed her eyes against the jangled trees and sky. Double vision was no longer an amusing novelty.

I'd had a rough old half hour. Why did she have to go on about the money? Of course I had money—what self-respecting media man would move an inch without a hand-out from the petty cash? So she pushed me into that corny old you-don't-know-a-thing-about-me routine. Vincent would think I'd gone stark staring mad, and perhaps I had. I was there to ferret out her secrets, not to bury them.

Then again there were her questions about the party. Did she really want to know how she'd screamed and carried on and hauled her clothes up above her head till in the end there wasn't a man even in that unfussy group who would touch her? How they'd laughed, and then not even been able to laugh, and pulled their clothes together, and gone? How I'd cleaned her, and held her till she was still?

And now, on top of all that, her terrible incantation, de-

stroying me, taking me back to the surgery, to the old world, even—I was beginning to hope—to the old me. The vacation brochure, I'd called it. The conducted tour. Maybe I was losing my sense of humor, but the sick joke shamed me. Fooling Katherine Mortenhoe, even supposedly for her own good, was a disgusting operation. I'd have packed the job in there and then if I'd had the courage to tell her.

The lane wound between vast fields of pale, misty green wheat. Soon it joined one of the old main roads leading seaward, almost deserted now with the thruway carrying all the traffic. Clouds were beginning to gather, high and windy. At my side Katherine was silent, fighting her own battles. It was a quiet time: a time, alas, for thinking.

After this job, another. And after that job, another. And all filled with moments another reporter might wait a lifetime to fix. How lucky I was. What was I, after all, but what I'd always wanted to be—a reporter? *The* reporter? I kicked down on the transmission, angrily, unnecessarily. The speedometer climbed. I wasn't a reporter, I was a reporting device. I was the world's morbid curiosity made flesh.

It was an exaggerated, self-dramatizing mood, and I checked it. What one had sold was buyable again, if not with money then with something else. I thought of Tracey. If I had the courage the death of Katherine Mortenhoe could be made an end rather than a beginning. . . . When the first of the motor cycles came by I glanced instinctively at my speedometer, and slackened off. It was too late, of course—I'd been doing well over ninety. More motor cycles came by till there were four of them riding abreast in front of me, waving me down. In the mirror I saw two more close on my tail. They weren't police. Their bikes were totally black and they wore plastic carnival masks under their helmets. Skulls, of course. I pulled out to overtake, but they eased over ahead of me and continued politely to wave me down. Their civility was probably the most menacing part of the whole exercise. I stopped the station wagon and waited.

"So sorry to trouble you, sir. And madam. We're the Collectors. We're collecting for the Society for the Encouragement of Cruelty to Everybody. It's a terribly good cause."

A juvenile joke, but one that put the situation succinctly enough. "You've come on a bad day," I said. "I'm a bit short myself, just at the moment."

"You won't believe this, sir, but that's what they all say." His voice smiled to suit the death's-head grin of his mask. "And there's usually some little thing in a pocket somewhere that they've forgotten."

My door was wrenched open and I was helped out. "You seem to have tripped over something, sir. Charlie, assist the poor gentleman."

The assistance was predictably a boot. The lads had slipped into a familiar and well-loved routine. I struggled to my feet. "Look at me. Do I honestly look as if I'll be much good to you?"

"Your car, sir, belies your tattered appearance. I suggest a fancy dress of some kind. Or—"

"Or a stolen car?"

This was a new idea. He looked from me to the station wagon and back again. Then he looked again at the station wagon, stooping to get a better view of Katherine. "She's ill," I said quickly. "Very ill."

"She certainly appears to be hardly in the pink." He turned back to me. "Tripped out?" he said.

I nodded a minimal agreement. She was through her shakes and sat sideways, fiddling at the folds of her dress with crabbed hands, a trail of dribble down the side of her face. He obviously hadn't recognized her. Probably his lot weren't exactly telly fans. "We're collectors too," I said. "Ours is the Society for the Preservation of Indigent Fringies."

It wasn't as good as his, but he'd had longer to work his out. It was a line, a possible way of reaching him. And there wouldn't be many. His mask, of course, betrayed nothing. "I can't say I've heard of it," he said.

"They're springing up all the time."

A car approached, slowed as it passed us, then accelerated away. The lads didn't appear to notice it. They were sure of themselves. He allowed the car's engine to fade. "A nice try, old man. But your psychology's wrong: at a time like this we can't both do the funnies. That represents a challenge, which of course I could never allow." He pulled at the cuffs of his huge black gauntlets and kicked the car door. "Search it," he ordered, and turned away.

They left me standing, of no importance, and started dragging things out into the road. Not wanting to watch, I joined their self-parodying leader. Eventually, no doubt, Vin-

cent would let the police see my tapes. "That car just might stop at the next telephone," I said.

"When lightning strikes the house next door, old man, you're delighted it was his and not yours. You don't ring up and complain. That would be tempting providence."

"Psychology again."

"No." He turned his ridiculous mask to face me. "Not psychology, old man. Cheap cynicism."

There was a shout from one of the searchers. I turned, expecting them to have found my duffle bag, and what it contained. But they were clustered around the open driver's door, pointing. We hurried over to see. A panel in the door had been opened, revealing a minor arsenal: tear-gas and dye aerosols, a small automatic of some sort, a weighted truncheon, a knife, handcuffs. . . . If I ever got as rich as Coryton Rondavel no doubt I'd fit the same. Which was one more reason for not getting as rich as Coryton Rondavel.

My companion pocketed the automatic and threw the rest of the stuff away into the hedge. "You really should be more careful the people you steal your cars from," he said. "One day they're going to get you into serious trouble."

Around the other side of the car a couple of the lads were attempting to bundle Katherine out. She was quite unable to help herself, and began to make loud shapeless noises. I was on my way around the hood but the noise stopped the lads better than I could have done. They let go and backed away like frightened children. Like certain party-goers I could remember. I propped Katherine up and kissed her forehead.

"Very touching. Will she belt up now?" He'd followed me around.

"I don't know," I said. "She gets these fits."

"To each his own."

She bubbled into silence, her eyes watching every movement. I was glad I couldn't tell what she made of the grisly carnival gear. I just stayed beside her, my hand on her shoulder.

They took her handbag, of course, and rifled it. They found the food, and mauled it, but were mercifully unable to eat it on account of their masks. Other cars passed, all of them slowing to stare, none of them stopping. Inevitably the lads came eventually to the duffle bag. And, equally in-

evitably, to the unassuming brown envelope at the very bottom. It was opened and the ten-pound notes counted. "Evidently, old man, there's more to being an indigent fringie than meets the eye. You must tell me about it some time."

He made me empty my pockets, then added up on a bit of paper the Benefit I had left, and Katherine's wretched seven pounds sixty, and Vincent's five hundred pounds, and gave me a careful receipt. Signed, and initialed S.E.C.E.

"It's a tired joke," I said.

"I know. That's Monday morning all over."

They drove away, leaving me to pick up Rondavel's Margaret's clothes off the road and stuff them back into the car. As I worked Katherine watched me, only her eyes moving, her thoughts locked in, her questions unasked, her fears unexpressed. I wondered about the pain. Her Dr. Mason had promised she would have none. I wondered if he was really all that powerful.

I finished packing the car and climbed in. The silence between us needed breaking. Somehow. "The money doesn't matter," I said. "We won't starve. And we've still got the car."

Why losing all our money didn't matter, and how we wouldn't starve, and what difference still having the car made I wouldn't have been able to say. But neither had I a story, a lie ready that would explain Vincent's five hundred pounds. As I felt at that moment I'd have told her the truth had she asked me. Which, since she could ask me nothing at all, was a safe enough generosity.

I drove off, leaving her handbag in the hedge where the Collectors had thrown it, pretending not to understand the noises and strangled movements she made to attract my attention and make me go back. I had a vague feeling that some time quite soon she'd be glad not to have a radio homer tucked neatly under her arm. I wasn't yet sure how or when, but quite soon I was going to have to leave her. The ultimate intrusion into other people's lives was the ultimate intrusion into my own. And it had to stop.

Dr. Mason looked up as Vincent came into the viewing room. "There's just been a holdup," he said. "Should we get on to the police?"

Vincent warmed up the other monitor and reran the tape.

"I'd rather wait. The last thing we want is the police barging in on Roddie, demanding statements, and what he's doing with Rondavel's car, and so on."

"So the gang gets away with it?"

Vincent sighed. On this man, who was no crusader, he could clamp down, but joylessly. "Look, why don't *you* ring the police, if you're so worried?"

"I'm in your hands. You know that."

"My dear Doctor, our consciences are our own property."

There was a long silence. On the real-time screen the road in front of Roddie's car slipped slowly by. Occasionally he glanced sideways at Katherine. She appeared to be perking up. The robbery sequence had been all good stuff. . . . As soon as Vincent was sure the doctor had nothing further to offer, that he understood his situation, a compromise was possible. "We'll have to tell the authorities before we transmit, of course. If they complain about the delay we can always blame Dawlish. The roster says he's on duty here till nine."

Dr. Mason made no comment. "That's her second attack in six hours," he said. "I don't know how much longer we can risk it."

"You really believe she will die just because you told her she would?"

"Isn't that why we chose her?"

"You may be right. You know, what really worries me is that if she dies of course you'll never get to write your paper."

Mason hunched lower in his chair. "One day you'll push me too far, Mr. Ferriman."

Vincent doubted this, but thought it not worth the test. "I think I'd better cut the discovery of the gun," he said brightly, changing the subject. "I know the chairman would appreciate it. He was shit scared on the telephone, so we can afford to be magnanimous. Even tycoons have a right to their little secrets." He punched Dr. Mason's shoulder in a friendly fashion. "The essence of good reporting, Doctor, is a decent respect for the truth. Both decency and respect sometimes require one to avert one's gaze."

But Dr. Mason was unresponsive to epigrams. He was watching the road slip slowly by in front of Coryton Rondavel's motorcar.

Winding down the window required great concentration. But it was worth it, for the wind that blew in confirmed her feeling that they were approaching the sea. It brought with it the smell of vacations, of sand shoes and boarding house bedrooms, and rotting seaweed that popped and slithered underfoot. . . . Perhaps the smell of decay was slightly stronger than she remembered. She hadn't been to the seaside in many years: they said the sea was changing, and smelled of different things. She and it together.

She had wondered only very briefly about all Rod's money. She was richer by far than he. Much more insistent was her curiosity concerning the kiss he had so lightly given her on her forehead. It might have been another fantasy. By now anything might. But it was strangely of a piece with his other kinds of caring. She flexed her starfish fingers and looked down, seeing them unaltered but feeling them red and thick and horny. They would never write her book now. She wasn't sorry—in it he would have been a sport, a hereditary accident. But she'd watched him get that way. She'd been watching him change all the times when he'd thought he'd been watching her. They had of course both changed. Change was possible. Her book was a sin.

The word stopped her. Even the Dial-A-Vicar had preferred to talk of failure and success, rather than sin and virtue. But she'd crawled out of antediluvian mud on the legs of curiosity, and descended from ancient trees in search of something more than survival. And looked for a meaning the moment her mind was capable of encompassing one. Dying—that too had to be either good or bad, right or wrong. Was it sentimental to think that Rod was telling her which? And what anyway was *sentimental* but a nasty, modern, ashamed invention?

They reached the outskirts of the town, drove under a flyover, and then up to join the thruway. It was nearly eight-thirty now, the traffic bright and thick. The elevated thruway stalked across the suburbs, giving a slow, dreamlike view of the distant terraces and crescents of the old town, the show town, and beyond it the sea. Rod nudged her and pointed, but she had seen it already. "Isn't it beautiful," she said, feeling suddenly very happy.

It always was beautiful. That first glimpse of the sea, because of what it meant, always was beautiful. Between rooftops, unexpectedly around the side of a hill, at the end of a

municipal car park, under blue skies or gray, it was one of the most exciting things she knew. It was beautiful with promises, and she could not remember a time when they had not been kept. This, she knew now, was why she had asked Rod to bring her here.

The thruway descended to a gigantic roundabout built half out over the water. She asked Rod to go around twice, just so that she could look along at the old promenade, at the high white Georgian houses and the icing-sugar pier and the streets full of sky. Then they turned off, seeking somewhere outside the Trust where they could park. They were lucky, it was their lucky day, and found a place almost at once, close to the show town boundary, drawing in as another car pulled away. . . . Even having no money for the meter was a lark. They bundled up all the clothes, and the holdall, and Rod's duffle bag, and the tablecloth full of food, and ran away down the pebbly beach. The gas tank was nearly empty anyway. The car, their magic carpet, could sit there and gather tickets. Its smiling owner would hardly grudge them a fine or two.

She was breathless, and laughing, and dropping towels and things behind her on the ringing stones. A dog joined in, pulled at trailing sleeves, barked a lot. Rod found a sheltered hollow by a breakwater and they scooped it deeper, piling the smooth pebbles up in a wall around them. The dog sat and wagged its tail and barked till Rod threw stones for it to fetch. Finally it got bored and went away. They lay back in their house and stared up at the sky.

"You know," Rod said, "it's not warm. In fact, it's bloody cold."

They bundled themselves up in Rondavel's Margaret's clothes.

"I wonder what Harry's doing at this moment," Katherine said, as the thought came into her head.

"Your husband? Worrying about how he's going to spend all that money, I expect."

She turned on one elbow. "How did you know Harry was my husband?"

"I know everything about you there is to know. Date of birth, childhood illnesses, the novels you wrote before you went to Computabook."

A curl of wind crept over the pebble wall and made

Katherine shiver. "I didn't think fringies read newspapers," she said.

"But I'm not a fringie. I told you. I'm nobody's nobody. The original outsider." He linked his hands behind his head. "You know, a man actually told me that once, a man who ought to have known better. He was called Klausen. 'You're the original outsider,' he said. 'And you're looking for someone to blame.' "

She shivered again. If there was one thing she hated, it was people who talked about their health. And there were other things he was going to tell her, things that already stuck into her. They weren't nice things. She stood up and held out her hands to him. He protested. "Listen to me, Katherine—"

"No. It's idiotic, huddling here feeling cold. Come on. You can tell me whatever it is as we go."

But the pebbles were too noisy, and the walking too difficult, and the sea too exciting as it hissed and nibbled at their feet.

In spite of the wind and the overcast sky, the beach had begun to fill up. Rod kept her by him, and apart, almost as if he were still afraid of her being recognized. Perhaps, on the other hand, he was simply being tactful, for she was no longer even Sunday's woman, let alone Saturday's or Friday's. The sou'wester was gone, and the clothes bore New York labels, and the goggles had been replaced with sunglasses from the pocket of the car. "More seasidey," Rod had said, handing them to her as they came down off the thruway. So perhaps he was just being tactful, in case she fell down in a spasm or otherwise made an exhibiton of herself.

They walked away from the show town with its too-good-to-be-true promenades and pier, along the beach toward the sports pavilion and bathing pool, kicking stones, and pausing, and moving forward in that casual, absorbed manner that beaches bring out in the most purposeful of people. The pebbles were worth noticing, and the tiny sand-hoppers, and the plastic bottle that rolled a little farther in with each wave. They passed a Punch and Judy show, its canvas flapping wildly in the wind, three bored children squatting in front of it, waiting for it to begin. The operator's feet stuck out under the side, and hammering could be heard.

The swimming pool had one man in it, going doggedly

from end to end while another man in white flannels and several scarves ran up and down beside him, shouting. A notice under the diving boards gave the day's sea pollution level. Past the swimming pool there was a concrete slipway for small yachts, and beyond that a line of wooden breakwaters curving around to another pier, shabby and broken-down. They decided to go as far as the pier and then return to where they had left their things. They were beginning to feel hungry.

Hereabouts the town council's efforts at keeping the beach clean petered out. Rod took her hand and led her up from the water's edge, avoiding the heavy scum that heaved gently to and fro, and walking on the pale dry shingle close under the sea wall. The smell here was bad. But they had an agreed destination, so persevered. The sun came out briefly. They didn't mind the brown water, the complicated smells: they were beach people, superior, self-contained.

The pier was rusty, and ended abruptly about thirty yards out over the sea, leaving the jagged edge of half a gutted dance hall complete with plastic cupolas. On the beach under it elaborate windbreaks had been erected behind which people appeared to be camping. The beach here was clean again.

"I should have thought of it before," Rod said. "View of the sea, no mod cons, highly desirable. What d'you think?"

He turned to Katherine and she nodded. She was excited and at the same time afraid. She was either far too old to be sleeping out on beaches, or not old enough. The stones would be hard and the wind cold, and the sea at night a frightening companion. But she wouldn't be alone. And if her dwindling hours were to end here there were few better places. The pebbles were real and so was she. And with Rod to talk to she wouldn't be alone.

He had gone ahead of her down the beach and into the shadow of the pier. She ran to catch up to him.

There was, as I knew there would be, a guy in charge. This is the age of leaders. They feed on the habit of structure. They sprout from the ground, and people accept them, and they're usually on the make. This one was a woman, small and thin and very important. She wore a dark brown overall and carried a shawl-like piece of knitting. She came

and stood very close in front of me, somehow making my greater height into a disadvantage.

"Yersss?" The final sibilant went on much too long.

"I was hoping there might be room for two little ones," I said jollily.

"We don't like fringies," she said, smiling complacently around the hiss.

"We're not really fringies."

"Your lady-friend isss." Behind her several of her existing tenants were taking notice.

"She's not my lady-friend. We're just . . . traveling together."

"We don't have no dirty stuff here neither."

"Of course not."

"We keep a nice place. And we don't like fringies." I wasn't going to argue. There'd be other places on the beach. I took Katherine's arm and began to move off. "However, if it's only for the one night . . . We never likes to turn nobody away, not even when it's fringies."

I glanced at Katherine and she nodded. She was trying not to laugh. "We've got no money," I said.

"Fringies never hasss. I don't know what they does with it, I'm sure. Orgies, most like."

She made it rhyme with corgis, helping me to keep my temper. "Can we stay or can't we?"

"Place up there by the middle pillar." She pointed with her knitting. "Leaks a bit so just pray for fine weather. Name of Baker. Missis."

I peered into the gloom. "Thank you very much, Mrs. Baker."

"Last one in keeps the beach swep'. That's you two. And there's a convenience up on the prom for your necessaries. No fires after dark, no pets, no drunken behavior. And no orgies."

And leave the bath as clean as you would like to find it. . . . I wondered what had happened to deprive Mrs. Baker of a boarding house she so richly merited. Mr. Baker, possibly, drunk and orgiastic. "It sounds very reasonable," I said. "Don't you think so, Katherine?"

But Katherine had gone in to the center pillar and was prodding the pebbles, feeling the bed. "It will do us very nicely, thank you, Mrs. Baker. We'll just go and fetch our luggage, and then—"

"Broom's with me any time you want it. Tide's flowing now—it's the ebb as keeps you busy. Still, there's the two of you, and we don't bother once it gets down to the end of the breakwater."

We thanked her again, and took our leave. She stood, needles clicking, and watched us go. As long as we acknowledged her position in the structure of things she would love us. She was a find. She was just what Katherine needed. With my selfish attempt at confession I had nearly spoiled it, the beach, the sea, the silly freedom she had contrived for us.

A couple of hundred yards away we tumbled into the shelter of a breakwater and could laugh. No doubt Mrs. Baker wasn't all that funny. But we thought her so. We rested, and retold the funniest bits, and laughed again. Then we heaved ourselves up and started back along the beach.

At the swimming pool the man in the water was still flailing, but his friend had pooped out and was leaning on one of the diving boards. He still shouted occasionally, but it was doubtful if the swimmer heard him. Farther on the Punch and Judy show had started, to an audience of the same three bored children. Katherine pulled me over, and we joined them.

It was all terribly ethnic. Punch was whacking at a policeman and shrieking like a mad dictator. Most of his squeaks were lost on the wind, but his meaning was clear enough and horribly, inexplicably comic. We glanced at each other and smiled. When, a moment later, the policeman's head suddenly came off and rolled about the stage we laughed aloud. The three children turned to stare at us. We laughed even more, at their solemn faces, even perhaps at Mrs. Baker again.

Up on the stage the policeman's body had been dragged away and replaced by Judy, complete with fire-engine-red-faced baby. It was then, however, that the wind chose to gather itself and catch at the striped front of the booth like a sail. The whole contraption staggered and blew over. It became a recumbent mess of sticks and flapping canvas and the wild legs of the Punch and Judy man inside. The children sat, interested at last, waiting to see what would happen next.

Naturally we went forward to help. Katherine sorted through the heaving mass and found the fasteners to the entrance up the back. The language of the man inside was

mercifully muffled: not that the kiddies, those particular kiddies, seemed to need much protection from the wickednesses of the world. Finally he emerged, sitting up, very indignant, in the wreckage of his show. I avoided Katherine's eye. "You're not hurt?" I said.

The Punch and Judy man grimaced, and removed a small shiny cylinder from his mouth. "Me call," he said. "Helps with the squeak. Pure silver, in case of accidents. Swallering like. Which has been known."

We helped him up. He wore a tidy, thirty-year-old suit, double-breasted, with a red-and-white striped bow tie. Although an old, old man, his face was surprisingly smooth and pink around its eager, professional smile. He dusted himself down and straightened his tie. "Ta very much. A friend in need is a friend in deed."

Then he remembered his audience. He held his arms wide to command their attention. "Kiddies, kiddies. . . . Owing to *un*foreseen circumstances, kiddies, the show is tempo*rar*ily suspended. . . ." He lowered his arms and bowed. "But mind you tell your chums, mind, old Punch'll be up to all his old tricks again this afternoon, sharp as paint. By royal charter, two o'clock pip emma."

The children sat on. "Are you sure you're all right?" Katherine asked.

"Not the first tumble, missis, and won't be the last." He rummaged under the canvas and brought out an armful of dolls, half a dozen Punches in different costumes, Judies, a policeman, a judge, a hangman, a bright green crocodile. "If the troupe's all right, then Tommy's all right. Know what I mean?" He held out his hand. "Tucker by name, Tommy by *pop*ular acclaim. Clean but clever. Established 1920, still going strong. Ta all the same."

Obviously he didn't want us hanging around to watch the humiliating business of putting his show together again. We shook hands and left him, taking the children with us. We were sure, we said, that their mommies would be wondering where they were.

"I hope he gets a better audience at two o'clock pip emma," Katherine said as we watched them run off. "Do you think he will?"

"I expect he's on a grant from the Folk-Arts Society." I'd done a feature once on old-style entertainers. "So it

doesn't really matter what sort of an audience he gets."

"Doesn't it?"

Of course it did. Her question wasn't based on sentimentality but on sentiment, a proper respect for Mr. Tucker, Tommy by *pop*ular acclaim. I'd long ago stopped trying to piece together the bits of Katherine Mortenhoe, of the only true continuous Katherine Mortenhoe, but this particular bit kept sticking out: respect for other people. It had been typically wrong-headed of her father to suggest that she wanted to die. I'd watched her fight her way out of her circumstances. She was more alive than anybody I knew. Except perhaps my wife. My ex-wife. My future wife.

Our things weren't disturbed in the hollow of stones where we'd left them. We divided the remaining food into two meals: after them we'd go hungry unless something happened, unless we made something happen. Katherine wasn't worrying. She ate her ration cheerfully, talking about other vacations she had had, mostly awful, that now could be made funny. I didn't feel she was making her future my responsibility, but simply that she found the present far more important.

For the first time in over an hour, longer than I had ever managed since the operation, I remembered who I was, what I was. I remembered Vincent. I didn't want to use him but if we weren't to starve I didn't see I had any alternative. So I excused myself and climbed away back up onto the promenade. I leaned on the rail and watched her in long shot, holding Rondavel's Margaret's skirts up with one hand, throwing stones into the sea. It was beautiful. The rollers came on in long dark ridges. The wind blew her hair about. And a dog, the same dog, had appeared from nowhere and was chasing each retreating wave, barking deliriously. I held the long shot. Vincent would think it beautiful too.

"We need money," I said. "Whoever's there, get this message to Mr. Ferriman. Tell him I'll be up on the promenade by the old pier at around eight. I'll be alone. Tell him to send someone with money."

Katherine turned, saw me, waved. I waved back. "Got that?" I said.

After a pause my sound gear came to life. "Dr. Mason here. I'm worried about the patient. I'd like you to—"

I cut him. "Got to hell," I said. "Just give Vincent my message, then go to hell."

He was a nice man. He had a nice room where nice doctors told nice patients nasty things. I didn't want him sitting on the other end, judging me. "You're a doctor, aren't you? Then just go and doctor."

I'd raised my voice. A man came and leaned on the rail beside me and asked me how I was feeling and I told him I was feeling fine. Then he asked me if I was feeling in a holiday mood and I told him no. Definitely no. If he'd tried any harder I'd have socked him and probably got myself into trouble, but he didn't. He just leaned beside me and sighed till I left him and went back down to Katherine. What talking to myself on the rail outside the gents had led him to hope I can't imagine.

On the way back to the old pier—there was no sign of Tommy—Katherine had a bad go of the shakes. I sat her down and wrapped her sleeping bag around her. It went on a long time, several hours, I don't know, I wasn't timing it, and afterward she had to wash in the sea, pollution levels and all. I helped her into another of the dresses: there was only one more left so I did my best to rinse out the previous one. It sounds squalid, and I can only say it wasn't. We were humble with each other. And this time she didn't get quite better. One arm stayed paralyzed and she appeared to have difficulty balancing as she walked.

I have to be explicit about her deterioration. And yet by doing so I give it a false importance. At the time there was so much else going for us that we scarcely even noticed the changes. We were very happy, together, that afternoon on the beach.

She was very tired, her eyes wide with the brightness of the sea, her ears singing with its noise. When they reached the old pier she let Rod spread out her sleeping bag in their place by the pillar, lay down on it, and fell asleep. She dreamed very vividly of Harry. It was evening when she woke, and she could remember nothing of the dream except that she had expected it to be distressing and it wasn't. Dr. Mason hadn't mentioned a false euphoria. Possibly her contentment was genuine. Though there was something, some small something still needing to be done, that hovered just out of sight in the back of her mind.

Rod was a few feet away, talking quietly with someone she couldn't quite see. She sat up, suddenly remembering Mrs.

Baker. "The beach, Rod. We ought to be tidying up the beach."

"Don't worry, pet. There wasn't much. I've seen to it."

She lay back. She could see why Mrs. Baker had said there was a leak around that particular pillar—above her head cracks gaped wide enough to see the sky through. She prayed, as instructed, for a fine night. . . . She realized that the person Rod was talking to was the Punch and Judy man. This was neat, the way things could be expected to turn out. She'd hoped to get to know him, and here he was.

" 'Course, a good bottler could make all the difference between going hungry and setting down to a slap-up repast. Real good bottler and you splits fifty-fifty. Otherwise it's sixty-forty. . . ."

She moved closer. Rod heard the stones creak and made a place for her beside him. The Punch and Judy man hardly seemed to notice. "Haven't used a bottler now, not in years. No call. Not since the grant come in. Lays a hat out, though, and lives in hopes."

Katherine leaned up on her good arm. "How was the two o'clock show?" she asked.

"You awake, then? Sleeping the sleep of the just, I said to young Rod here. You're Kathie, I'm Tommy." She knelt and shook hands again. "Never forget a face or a favor. . . . Show wasn't much. Day was when kiddies stood in queues, shouting 'We want Punch and Judy.' Today there's not much call for it. Don't know why. Tell you what, though. . . ." He paused, massaging his hands, enjoying what he was going to tell them. ". . . Done plenty of shows for the toffs up in that London place. Made a film for their arch-ives. Questions . . . talk about questions. 'Course, I told them a lot of cobblers. I mean, what showman gives away his little secrets?"

He talked on. "Done me time in conjuring, of course. Always start with something colorful. Flags of all nations. Vanished a live canary once. Had the Cruelty on to me for that. . . . Funny how people are. Vanish a dozen women and nobody says a word. Not so nimble now, mind. But nimble enough." He opened his hands very wide, then clapped them together and produced a battered plastic flower out of his sleeve. "Nimble enough for an old 'un."

It began to grow dark. Katherine was content to sit and watch his extraordinary animation. He was eighty-six, he

said, played the schools now mostly. Exam questions and all —part of the nation's heritage.

"But the royal charter bit's right enough. Some old king, George it might have been, or William, give Punch and Judy the right to twenty minutes, any time, any place. Never been took away, not as far as I know. . . ." Suddenly he broke off. "If you're heating something up you'd best get moving. Ma Baker don't take to fires after sundown. Had a major conflagration once, as I understand it. Cup er tea? Bit er stew needs warming through?"

Katherine had forgotten about food. Rod said he was going up into town to scrounge something later on. "Can't have that. Old Tommy never forgets a face or a favor. Just you fetch some sticks and we'll see what we got."

He went away to his own neat bivouac and returned with tin plates and spoons and a large saucepan. "Hey presto—all-purpose stew. Warm your cockles."

They made a fire of sticks and plastic bottles. All-purpose stew turned out to be largely baked beans and cut-up sausages, very thick on the bottom of the pan. There were other fires around them, and a few superior people with camping gas burners. Everyone was friendly. In spite of the openness of the beach Katherine felt contained, and even private. Nobody exceeded their invisible boundaries, or stared, or asked questions. They made their own lives, and she made hers.

"What's a bottler?" she asked, suddenly remembering the conversation she had woken to. She liked the old man's chatter.

"Bottler? Bless you, that's the bloke what goes round with the hat. Good one makes all the difference between going hungry and setting down to a slap-up repast." He rambled on about bottlers he had known. Then his plans: he was moving on first thing. Do on an old folks' estate. Funny how the old folks could still get a laugh out of Punch's thievish tricks. . . . She noticed that Rod was getting more and more restless. He'd been uneasy the whole evening, as if the Punch and Judy man bored him. Or perhaps it was she who bored him. Sometimes he was very close and sometimes he was so distant it made her want to cry. There were parts of his mind she didn't know at all. Time was so short. She needed him, but more than that she needed to understand

him. She needed to understand just one person before she died.

Finally he stood up and made some excuse and got a flashlight from his duffle bag and wandered away up the beach. The sea hissed and sucked. She watched him go, remembering her bravado of the morning. *I clean up after myself. And when I don't you leave me.* It had been cruel to them both, and ridiculous. The bright inhumanity of the woman she had grown out of. The woman, if there was any hope at all, she had to have grown out of.

The old Punch and Judy man hardly seemed to notice Rod's going. He was telling a story about an escapologist done up in chains and put in a gunny sack on the cobbles outside the Tower of London. Sacks she knew, but gunny was a word from before she was born.

Vincent's man was waiting for me under a street lamp. He gave me another of NTV's thick brown envelopes. The ease with which Vincent poured out bank notes revolted me. The man and I had nothing to say to each other. I opened the envelope and took out two fivers and handed the rest back. Katherine wouldn't mind. She had things to concern her other than where money came from or went.

"You sure that's enough?" I said I was sure that was enough. He put the remaining money away in a briefcase. "Mr. Ferriman said to tell you you're doing a great job. And to keep on with the good work."

I stared at him. I needed Vincent's encouragement like I needed typhus.

"And he's fixed tomorrow. He's rented a caravan along the coast a bit. It looks beat up and you can find it by accident like. The way the lady's going she won't ask too many questions."

He gave me the address on a piece of paper. The way the lady was going Vincent stood to make a considerable loss on his investment. Twenty-six days he'd paid for. . . . Maybe that was why Mason had been in the monitoring room. Maybe he had plans to sue the nice doctor. Three hundred thousand pounds for three or four or five half-hour shows was a lot of money.

I put the address away in my back pocket. "Tell Mr. Ferriman thank you. No—I can tell him that any time. Tell him you saw me, and I was looking fine, and—"

"I can't say that. To tell the truth, you're looking terrible."

I left him under his lamp post. It was time he learned that the last thing the Man with the TV Eyes wanted was the truth. I didn't go straight back to Katherine but on, with my fivers in my hand, to the nearest pub. I had no intention of getting drunk: I merely was putting off, in the ritual, male fashion, the eventual homecoming.

Some people are fascinated by chance decisions. The history that would have been changed if only so-and-so hadn't stopped to pick his nose at some apparently unimportant moment. Me they bore stiff. All the same, chance decisions and unimportant moments and unimportant places sometimes come together like you'd never believe. That particular evening the unimportant moment was eight-thirty and the unimportant place was an unimportant pub with an unimportant telly.

This telly showed me Katherine Mortenhoe in her own, sensational, one and only, never-to-be-equaled Human Destiny half hour.

I left that pub even soberer than I had entered it. Colder and soberer. And wiser too. . . . You see, beauty isn't in the eye of the beholder. Neither is compassion, or love, or even common human decency. They're not of the eye, but of the mind behind the eye. I had seen, my mind had seen, Katharine Mortenhoe with love. Had seen beauty. But my eyes had simply seen Katherine Mortenhoe. Had seen Katherine Mortenhoe. Period.

I couldn't even blame Vincent. He hadn't cut the footage for shock effect. He hadn't changed the emphasis. He hadn't even cheapened it with sob-stuff narration, or music over. The sound track was mine and the sequences were mine also. It was Katherine Mortenhoe as my eyes had seen her.

And my eyes had seen a dribbling, palsied wreck. My eyes had seen a ponderous, middle-aged woman capering unsuitably about a beach. My eyes had seen her filthied clothes. My eyes had seen her lumpy, graceless body lumber naked out of a pretty-pretty stream and stoop for the towel so that her breasts swung like pale, water-filled bladders. The sarcastic wolf whistles of my fellow-drinkers are still with me. This was how they saw her. When she wasn't repulsive she was pathetic. I knew her to be neither.

But it was I and I alone who had assembled through the

medium they tell us cannot lie definitive evidence that she was just that: either repulsive or pathetic, and often both. Evidence that had been seen and believed by maybe sixty million people.

I loved her. If that was the word. And there was no other.

There are times when self-disgust is a luxury, when you can scrooge around in it and feel delightfully unclean. There are other times when self-disgust is simply a destroyer. And there are yet other times, I know now, when self-disgust is a challenge. I paused on the promenade by the entrance to the old pier. I could go down to her, and vomit up my guilt, and feel better, and vanish into the night. But she didn't want my guilt. I could instead simply vanish into the night, keeping my guilt to myself, and pray that she died before Vincent got other men to her. But she wasn't going to die, not in the few hours that I could win.

I walked out onto the pier. The sea and the sky were utterly dark, and as I left the street lamps behind me I switched on my flashlight. The floor of the pier was made of thick planks, caulked with tar like the deck of an old barge. I walked along the side of the windowless dance hall to the very end of the pier. There was a high protective railing, and signs warning of the danger. I climbed up the railing and sat astride it. I could hear the sea below, and the creaking of the dance hall shell behind me. I shone my light down, but the sea was too far below and the beam died in the void. I had never in my life thought of suicide as a viable course of action and I didn't then. In fact, the idea never entered my head.

I sat on the rail and considered the options. A new one occurred to me. I was, I insist, cold sober. I was not reacting with panic or hysteria. I suppose I insist on this because I am in many ways proud of the detestable, self-mutilating thing I did, and won't be given excuses. I took my flashlight and threw it as far out to sea as I could, watching it flash and swing and curve down till it disappéared. It was a heavy flashlight and it went a long way. I watched it because I didn't want there to be any suggestion later on that I might have dropped it by accident. If I was to spit in Vincent's face I must do it properly.

I took off my sound gear and threw that away also. The gray, overcast day had darkened uncomplainingly into a starless, sightless night. I stayed looking out to sea, staring into

the impenetrable black. The pain soon began. When I couldn't go on looking I closed my eyes. I'm not good at pain. All I could do was hang on.

I've been told that I made noises, and that it was these noises that got people up from the beach below to help me. I'm afraid I don't remember. I only know that by the time they got to me the pain had stopped. I had bought back what I had sold. I was free.

EIGHT *Tuesday*

Roddie had turned in a winner. Vincent was never wrong about these things. The show had everything: fine art-work, a strong narrative line, pathos, suffering, excitement, humor, offbeat characters, even some magnificently earthy female nudes. The telephone calls started coming in even while it was being screened The public was siphoned off by Public Relations, but the others he tried to speak to each and every one. It was natural to value most the praise of his fellow professionals. Inevitably an invitation or two snowballed into an after-the-show party in the Reception Lounge. It was a shame Roddie couldn't have been there. Everybody said the show was a certain award winner. And to prove it several NTV directors were there, and champagne was authorized. Although modest to the last, privately Vincent agreed with them. And Vincent was never wrong about these things.

By midnight the critics had gone, suitably encouraged, to hack out their copy. He began easing out the others. Tomorrow was another day, he said. He even reminded them that the Show Must Go On. They slapped his shoulder, and had just one more drink, and went. At one o'clock he set his secretaries emptying ashtrays and collecting dirty glasses. At two o'clock he personally closed the doors to the lounge, poured himself a final nightcap, and took the elevator up to his flat. He toasted himself, his triumph, in the elevator mirror. Then he changed his mind, stopped the elevator at the sixth floor and took it down to the monitoring room instead. His triumph ought to be shared. If La Mortenhoe was asleep he'd call up Roddie. People liked to be told they were appreciated.

In the monitoring room he found Dr. Mason asleep in front of a bright blank screen. Unreasonably the alcohol

went suddenly cold on him. He put his half-filled glass down on top of the monitor and tried without success to get a picture. There was no sign of either Simpson or Dawlish. His head was buzzing and he took a neutralizer.

"Where's the duty engineer?" he asked, unnecessarily loud.

Dr. Mason jerked awake. "I didn't hear you come in."

"You were asleep. Where's the duty engineer?"

"Of course I wasn't asleep. . . . I sent him home. We agreed I had to be here. There was no point in both of us—"

"You had no right. Now the monitor's gone on the blink."

Vincent turned on the second set and drummed his fingers, waiting for it to warm up. With a busy day ahead of him he ought to have been in bed hours ago.

"Is that what it is?" Dr. Mason said. "I thought it was just night."

"Night is always brilliant white, of course."

Dr. Mason mumbled. He looked half dead. The second set warmed up and showed the same blank white rectangle. There was no picture, and no sound either.

"That's right," Mason said. "It went like that straight after he threw his flashlight away."

"Who threw whose flashlight away?"

"Your man. Your Roddie. He threw his flashlight away. After that it went dark and then suddenly bright. I waited for something to happen. I . . . suppose I may have dozed off."

Vincent sat down. Those neutralizers worked so bloody slowly. "When did all this happen?"

"I don't sit here watching the clock."

"It's important, Doctor. Please try to remember."

". . . He'd gone to the pub and watched the show. It wasn't at all bad. Went down well in the pub too."

"I'm so glad. Then what happened?"

Dr. Mason considered. "Well now . . ."

Time seemed to have slowed to a complete standstill. Vincent got up again, abruptly, feeling as if his head would burst. "It doesn't matter. You can tell me on the way over."

"Where are we going? I can't leave. I've got my patient to consider."

"Certainly. That's why you're coming with me."

He went to the telephone, started looking down the list for the extension number of the Air Transport Controller. A call at this hour of the night would take some explaining.

Katherine sat up. She'd heard what I'd been listening for ever since we'd climbed into the van. I'd hoped she'd be asleep. I'd hoped in a makeshift sort of way that if she was asleep she wouldn't hear the helicopter when it came. And if she didn't hear it then maybe none of the next bit would ever happen. Our discovery, my explanations, their recriminations, his contractual reminders. But she wasn't asleep. She heard the helicopter when it came at last, and she sat up.

Of course, I should have had a plan. Right from the beginning I should have thought beyond the bargain I was striking and the price I would pay. If I didn't have a plan then a price—though different—would be extracted from her as well. And I didn't have a plan. I didn't have a plan because when I finally came to think about it I realized that no plan was possible.

By then they'd got me down off the pier: Katherine, and Tommy, and two or three others. They thought I was drunk and I didn't disillusion them. Not that they'd have been easy to convince—I mean, who really goes blind, suddenly, for no reason at all, in the middle of the night, on the end of a broken-down pier? So I let them lead me down and thought myself lucky to be spared immediate embarrassment. I'd reckoned without Mrs. Baker.

She turned us out.

To be precise, she didn't even let us in. It was her moment of purest joy, I could hear it in her voice. She met us by the edge of the windbreaks and read us her own private riot act. She had the other guests to think of, she said. Drunkenness was not allowed, never had been. Fringies was all the same. Give them an inch and they took a mile.

A confused mass of something hit my chest. Dropping most of it, I discovered it was made up of our possessions. I recognized the zipper around Katherine's sleeping bag, and joined it, and between us we stuffed most of the things in. It was probably almost as dark there on the beach for her as it was for me. I and my lady friend, Mrs. Baker remarked behind us, could have our orgy somewheres else.

I followed close as Katherine hobbled away. Soon she sat down and I sat down beside her. She shivered. It was her own shiver, unrecorded, untransmitted, ungloated-over. We were both of us free.

"You came back," she said. "I'd thought perhaps you wouldn't."

"Of course I came back."

"But you got drunk first. . . . I've never known about men getting drunk. Were you upset? You sounded as if you were upset."

I put one arm around her shoulders. Out of all the thoughts in my head there was not one that I could tell her. Not even that I loved her. If that was the word. And there was no other. "I'll look after you," I said, forgetting in all honesty that I no longer could.

For as long as we sat there the future seemed unnecessary. Luckily for us there was someone rather less romantic. Footsteps approached across the pebbles. A throat was cleared. "Orgy or no orgy, I reckon you two'll freeze to death come morning."

It was Tommy. I stood up, suddenly terribly aware of my sightlessness. I didn't know where he was, how far, in what direction. "Yes. Well, Tommy, I thought of going along to the—"

"The thing is, there's always my old van. It's a bit crowded, but at least it's private. Never forget a face or a favor. The police moves you on if you kips in the shelters."

He was right. His van *was* a bit crowded. It was a largish van, but filled with conjuring props, and puppets, and the Punch and Judy booth, and various lumps I couldn't possibly identify. All the same, he fitted us in somehow. . . . And it was then, as we climbed up and tried to make ourselves comfortable, that I started listening. Listening for Vincent's helicopter and hoping that Katherine would be asleep when it came.

"Isn't that a helicopter?" she said, sitting up, very awake.

"It might be," I said.

"I didn't think helicopters flew much after dark."

"They don't usually."

The noise approached. Suddenly Katherine gasped. I searched for her, found a puppet's leg, then the cover of her sleeping bag. "What is it?" I asked.

"The lights hurt my eyes."

I should have guessed that Vincent would bring the camera chopper, halogen floods, the full production number. I always told him he overlit his night O.B.'s. By now the beach would be flattened by the weight of lights.

It seemed as good a moment as any. "I can't see any lights," I said.

"Don't be silly. Of course you can."

I left it. There'd be other moments just as good. Or better. The helicopter note changed, a gale blew up around the van as the helicopter hovered, then settled. Finally it switched off and flailed slowly down to silence. Feet hurried, stumbling, across the beach. They were going in the direction of the pier. Away in the town somewhere a church clock struck four. Four in the morning . . . Vincent wasn't going to be exactly popular with Mrs. Baker.

"Keep down," I said to Katherine. "Don't let them see you."

It was just possible, if Tommy kept his mouth shut, that Vincent wouldn't find us. And if Katherine asked me why they shouldn't see her, then I was cued in, with the script more or less prepared. But, "You told them where to find me," she said, and it was as if she had looked over my shoulder and put a pencil through the first two pages. I wished I could see her face. The windows of the van would be steamed up, Vincent's lights angling sharply down. I wished I could see her face, and tried to remember it, and it evaded me. I felt I had never properly seen anybody, and now I never would.

"Why did you tell them? I must know."

I tried to begin, but nothing came. She shifted, and found me with her good hand, and held on tightly. She could see me, of course. I felt indecent: I might be detestable, spotty, ugly, my fly might be undone, anything.

"It'll be all right, Rod. I wouldn't ask if I didn't know that."

So I began.

She stayed quiet, asking nothing, saying nothing, till he had done. Below them on the beach there was confused argument, and people walking to and fro, tripping and cursing. She heard Vincent's voice, and Mrs. Baker's, and others she didn't recognize. She heard them, and listened to them, and even tried to make out what they were saying. Rod's whispered words were different, conveyed in a different medium. She knew and understood, almost without hearing, their smallest intonation. She occupied his reality. He offered

no reasons, no excuses. Between the two of them excuses were unnecessary. And anyway she knew them all.

And anyway they were useless. In spite of them, because of them, he nauseated her: what he was, what he had done to her. It was, she knew quite well, obscene. Even his blindness was horrible, a self-mutilation that could only be another burden to her. His kindness within the framework he had accepted made no sense. She had put herself at his mercy, and now he was demanding an impossible forgiveness. Not with words, not even with humbleness, but demanding to be forgiven all the same. Mostly, of course, it was his shame that she could not tolerate.

Circuits, linkages, her whole life insisted that she reject him utterly. When at last he had finished she had nothing to say. Her silence would hurt him and she was immovably silent. He started heaving himself about. "Help me out," he said.

She found she was holding his arm, and let it go. He was trying to make her responsible, even for this. He wanted her to ask him to stay. Or he wanted her to force him to leave. And she would not.

"So that you can tell them where I am?"

"If I wanted to do that I could shout from here."

"Then why don't you?" He was on his hands and knees, feeling his way around things to the doors of the van. "Look at you now. Making all the noise you can. You want to have it both ways. Be honest. You want to turn me in so that fucking Vincent will go on loving you. And at the same time you want me to pat you on the head and say never mind, you couldn't help it."

He tried to stand up, caught his head on a sharp corner. "Help me out, Katherine. I'll find the wall of the promenade and go along it. I'll say I came across the road. You got a lift away. I shouted and they didn't hear."

"And what am I supposed to do all this time?"

"Stay put. If Tommy keeps quiet you'll be safe enough till morning."

"And what then?"

"How should I know what then?"

"You ought to. You said you'd look after me."

"I lied."

Such an overpitched, melodramatic, middle-of-the-night

conversation to be having. "Please stay," she said. "Please stay. . . ."

They had, one way and another, both been hurt enough.

Footsteps approached, left the pebbles, came up the steps onto the promenade. Vincent Ferriman's voice: "You try the shelters along that way. I'll try the old dance hall. They can't have gone far."

Somebody brushed along the back of the van. She held her breath. The footsteps went away. Rod groped around in the air above her head. "Katherine—"

"Don't talk. Just stay. Please."

She helped him to sit down. After a long time the footsteps returned. First Vincent Ferriman's, that stood, and paced, and kicked the tire of a car along the row as they waited, and then the others'. There was argument. This time Katherine recognized the voice of Dr. Mason. She'd come a long way since that morning in his office. She was glad, for both their sakes, he hadn't been able to keep away.

Vincent was in charge. Who else? But he wasn't ever going to find her. "Right, people. Can we have some order please? *Thank* you. . . . Now, obviously we're wasting our time. They've probably hitched a lift somehow. So we need grounds for calling in the police. Not even NTV can handle this sort of search on its own. Doctor, can we fairly say she's in need of urgent medical attention?"

"Of course we can. I've told you and told you. Unless—"

"Good. In that case there's no problem. Even if they've hitched a lift they've got to be put down somewhere. And I'll lay on radio flashes. They'll be picked up soon enough once it's daylight."

They were invisible. They'd never be picked up, ever. Vincent led his men away, crisply down the steps and across the beach. The helicopter started up and went, taking its lights with it, leaving the inside of the van suddenly intensely dark. Gradually the dim street lamps reasserted themselves. She eased her cramped body. "What now?" she said. But Rod was asleep. She tucked the blanket from his duffle bag about him as neatly as her clumsy arm would allow, and settled to wait for the dawn. Ever since she had asked him, and he had stayed, they had not spoken. But they'd communicated. She wasn't worried.

Tommy's noisy arrival roused them both. He flung open

the back doors of the van, pushed in an armful of his things from the beach, and then quickly shut the doors again. In a moment he was around the side, climbing in, starting the engine, moving off. "Looks like being a nice day," he said. "And I'd stay where you are. No sense in getting seen all over the place."

The van threw them around. A crazy assortment of swords and vanishing cabinets and plastic goldfish bowls and old wickerwork hampers leaned and clattered about them. Conversation was impossible. "I'll stow everything when we get out of town," Tommy shouted. "You never know who's watching."

From where she crouched Katherine could see the upper stories of houses reeling by. Rod sat hunched, with his arms over his head. After a few miles the houses thinned and were replaced by curving lamp standards. The van slowed, turned left, and finally pulled in under some trees. Tommy switched off, and sat massaging his hands. "I could tell them blokes was police, for all they said they wasn't. I don't know what you two done, and I don't want to. Old Tommy never forgets a face or a favor."

Katherine climbed out, and guided Rod after her. The clouds of the previous day were nearly all gone and the sun was warm and she had been nearly twelve hours without a rigor. Tommy watched them, and although he made no comment she felt obliged to offer some sort of explanation. "He's got this . . . this thing wrong with his eyes," she said.

"And you're not all that spry yourself, pet."

In fact, of course, they made a ludicrous couple. She shrugged, and the old man patted her arm and went around to the back of the van and started sorting out his possessions. Rod stood beside her, turning his face up to the sky. "It's a fine day," he said. Then, abruptly, "What sort of a man is Gerald?"

The name shocked her. "Gerald?"

"Your first husband. I never got to see him. What sort of a man is he?"

"It's been a long time. I don't know. I don't—"

"Would he take you in?"

"Take me in?" Ten seconds before she would have denied any such idea, but now she knew with the utter certainty of hindsight that it was Gerald she had been circling, Gerald she had not quite been making for ever since she left the

city. "I don't know if he'd take me in. But I'd like to try."

"If he doesn't, you're landed."

"We'd think of something."

"Besides, with the money I've got maybe you and old Tommy could—"

"Gerald's school isn't far. I'd like to see him."

"It's the Easter holidays. Maybe he won't be there."

"Maybe he will."

"If the police have any sense it's the first place they'll look."

It was he who had suggested Gerald. Now he was hedging. Perhaps he was afraid of her being hurt. Gerald, she was sure, would never hurt her. "I'm willing to chance the police. If you are."

He turned away, felt for the side of the van. "I'm free of the lot of them. They'll want money, of course. Their money back. Their money . . ." He smiled, and seemed to be seeing. His eyes were clear, and bright brown, and seemed to be seeing. ". . . I've a wife and a son. Did I ever tell you that?"

"Mostly we talked about me."

"Anyway, that's all. . . . She's Tracey. I met her on a trip to Boston. We call the boy Roddie Two. I've a photograph somewhere."

He dug his wallet out of the back pocket of his jeans and held it out to her. She took it, but did not open it. After a pause she said, "He's a fine little boy."

"He'll be grown, of course. That picture's two—no, nearly three years old."

She gave him his wallet back. She didn't want to know. She was glad he had another life, someone to go to, but she didn't want to know about it. "So we'll ask Mr. Tucker if he'd be kind enough to give us a lift as far as Gerald's school," she said.

She couldn't always be noble. She couldn't always be happy for the people who would be here, and loved, when she wasn't.

The telephone beside the bed rang for a long time before either of them stirred. Finally the woman put out a frowzy, motherly hand and lifted the receiver. She listened briefly, then shook Harry. "It's for you, love. The TV man. He's on the telephone. He wants a word."

Harry struggled awake, saw her looking down at him, was relieved. "What time is it?"

"Not yet nine. Bloody cheek."

He took the receiver from her. "Vincent? It's not yet nine. What on earth are you—" He broke off. Listened. "Well, that's your problem. . . . No, I've no idea at all where she might go. I stopped trying to guess what she'd do years ago."

He lay back on the pillow and closed his eyes. "Gerald? After what he did to her? You must be joking. . . . No, unless she's gone stark, staring mad, that's the last place she'd go." He opened his eyes and gestured toward the kitchen and a cup of tea. "I told you, I've no suggestions at all. She had a thing about old places—if there's a ruin around you might find her there. . . . Her passport? It's in the desk here. . . . Of course I'm certain."

He put down the receiver, hauled himself out of bed and padded through to the living room, scratching as he went. A moment later he returned. From the kitchen there were comfortable noises of the kettle being filled. "Hello? It's in the drawer like I said. Though from what I saw of her on the show last night she'll hardly be trotting about the gay Continent, passport or no passport."

He climbed back into bed and pulled the covers up to his chin, then reconsidered and pushed them down low across his stomach, ready for the arrival of the tea. "No. And you can give her father a miss too. She hated him. In fact she hated everybody. She even hated me, it seems. . . . No—a ruin's your best bet. She had this thing about old places."

He was about to ring off. Then, "Vincent? Yes. I wonder . . . when you find her, give her my love, will you? Tell her I miss her. And let me know if you decide to bring her back here. Give me a chance to . . . tidy up the flat a bit."

The tea arrived. He smiled, and nodded at Vincent's voice, and returned the receiver between forefinger and thumb to its cradle. He'd seen a man do it like that in a movie once.

"They've lost her," he said. "Camera's broken down or something. Thought I might know where she'd go."

"Bloody cheek."

"Steady on. Go easy. I'm still her husband. If not me, then who?"

"It's just the time, love. Not yet nine."

"She was a very remarkable woman. Just you remember that."

"Tea up, love. And you're a very remarkable man."

She placed the tray in the middle of the bed between them and around it they played little games with each other's sexual extremities. Then, before it got too cold, they drank their tea. The time passed delightfully.

Peter was having a cooked breakfast with his friend when the telephone called him away from the table. He liked a cooked breakfast and he always had a cooked breakfast, so he took it with him out into the hall.

"Who? Mr. who? Ferriman . . . oh yes, the man from NTV." He stopped chewing. "My God. It's bad news. You're ringing to tell me she's dead. Poor Katie-Mo. Poor, poor Katie-Mo. . . ."

. . . A long while later he returned to the breakfast table. His friend saw his face, and sat him down, and fetched him fresh coffee from the hot plate on the side.

"How should I know where she's gone? I told them I hadn't a clue. . . . They knew she'd been here—perhaps she'd given me some kind of hint. I tried to remember. . . . I expect you heard most of it. All about going away, and . . . sort of saying good-bye. There wasn't anything else, was there?"

His friend sorted out what Peter was talking about. He shook his head. There'd been, he was sure, nothing. Only sort of saying good-bye.

Clement Pyke's telephone rang on an empty boat—empty, that is, of the living. He had died by his own hand some ten hours before, after watching his daughter dance on a gray pebbly beach. There were things that had long been beyond him. He left a large number of notes but the police, when they finally came, were to suppress them every one.

Vincent let the bell ring for a long time before giving up. "Evidently not at home," he said.

Dr. Mason took his ball-point out of his pocket, stared at it, and put it back. "There'll be a pattern," he said. "She knows she's not got long. She can no longer afford just to let things happen."

"Unless of course that's all she *can* afford to do."

"You're playing with words."

"Perhaps I am. But the two of them couldn't be picky. They'd have taken the first lift that came along."

"We've *got* to find her."

"I know that. The police have their roadblocks. Now we've got them checking ancient monuments. I don't see what else we can do."

"Ring your man's wife. Perhaps she'll have some suggestions."

"You're behaving like a frightened hen."

"And you like an empire builder, dressing for dinner while the ship goes down."

"I will not ring Tracey. All that would do would be to bring her along here, emoting all over the place. She's hardly seen him in three years. . . . Klausen's the man who could help if anybody could. And all he talks about is transference, and mutilation trauma, and Roddie being saner than anyone here imagined."

"Saner?"

"That's what he said."

"I'd like to meet this Dr. Klausen."

"No you wouldn't, old son. He keeps a sense of humor. And he's got his guilts well in hand."

The telephone rang, making both men jump. But it was only Search HQ phoning in a negative report on the instructions of the Chief Inspector. Dr. Mason got up, went to the window, leaned his forehead on the glass. Vincent phoned down to the cutting room—unless something happened pretty damn quickly he'd have to start knocking together some fill-in footage for the evening's show.

Roddie's behavior he did not think about at all. Certain things—like the Civil Liberties Committee or the nation's tax structure—only annoyed his ulcer.

It was comedy spy-thriller stuff. Katherine and me squashed into the vanished part of one of Tommy Tucker's vanishing cabinets. It had been designed for one occupant, and a pretty skinny occupant at that. But neither of us laughed much. Neither were we all that turned on by the thrills of sexual propinquity. We accommodated ourselves to each other as best we could, and waited. . . . The van slowed at the roadblock and stopped. After a brief conversation the back door of the van was thrown open. I felt Katherine take

a deep breath. If she had one of her shakes now, we were done for.

The van sagged as someone heavy climbed in. Grunting ensued as things were shifted about. "You've got enough stuff in here, dad. What's it all in aid of?"

"Royal Charter, that's what. That's what it's in aid of. I tell you, some old king, George it might have been, or William, give Punch and Judy the right to twenty minutes, any time, any place."

"Yeah. Well, there hasn't been no George or William around for a year or two now. . . ." The policeman was clambering nearer. "You got a license?"

"A license?" Tommy sounded worried. Were we going to be caught just because he didn't have some bloody silly bit of paper?

"That's right, dad. A showman's license."

"I sets up my show, see. Never cause no trouble. It's the kids, they—"

"Kids or no kids, you need a license." The policeman's head was turned, looking out of the van. When Tommy didn't answer he swore under his breath and started working his way out again. At his nearest he'd been a foot, maybe two, away.

Under cover of his banging about Katherine breathed again, and shifted her head against my chest. The policeman slithered down onto the road, followed by what sounded like a small avalanche of Tommy's pots and pans. "I tell you, dad, if you've not got a license you're in dead trouble."

"My brother taught me the way of it. He never had no license."

"That's as may be."

There was a long pause. "I got a *permit?* Is that what you mean? All showmen got *permits.*"

They went away around the side of the van, arguing. We relaxed. Good old Tommy. To any self-respecting policeman a license in the hand was worth two missing persons in the bush any day. . . . Finally Tommy climbed back into the driving seat.

"Now remember," the policeman said, leaning in, "if you see a couple like that by the road, don't pick 'em up. Just drive on to the next phone box and give HQ a tinkle. The number's there on that bit of paper."

"Me pick up a couple of loonies? You must be joking."

He drove off. After what seemed a very long time he stopped the van and came and let us out. "They must want you bad," he said. "But I tell you one thing though—a couple of saner loonies *I* never seen."

It was a testimonial I really needed. I smiled at him, hoping he'd notice. One way and another over the last couple of hours the blindness had been getting me very low, getting me so I no longer knew myself, no longer knew what I was. But Tommy knew.

You see, in the past I'd often imagined being blind. I'd thought of it in terms of doing things, of getting about, of not hurting myself. And I'd been wrong. Even in the strangest surroundings you can feel safe by a wall, or in a chair, or against some tree. No, the worst vulnerability is to be seen and not to see. There is nothing, no cloak, no box, nothing that will protect you from the eyes of those you know are there yet cannot see. I no longer knew myself. I'd felt it first in the night, talking in the van with Katherine. I'd felt it again standing in the sunlight, remembering Tracey. I no longer knew myself. Katherine and the old man, they talked together, and with me, and they didn't seem any different, but I got back from them nothing of me.

Then Katherine jolted me out of my mood, had one of her shakes, a bad one. I helped her. She needed exactly what I could give: closeness. Poor Tommy was embarrassed and went away, I've no idea where. A long time later he came back with a bottle of milk and Katherine drank some. Later still I heard him pumping up a primus and prepared myself for the arrival of more all-purpose stew. But I'd underestimated him—it was water he was heating. The lady might like a wash, he said, over his shoulder, going again.

The trouble was that when Katherine was better she was so very much better. She was gay. There was a lightness about her presence that demanded little of me but that I couldn't match. Tommy drove very slowly. I sat beside her in the back of the van and thought about Tracey. What would she see? Me? Me as I remembered myself, or me as a self-mutilated lunatic? And how would I know what she saw? How could she tell me what she really saw? They were pointless questions. They went round and round so that I was glad when Tommy announced a roadblock up ahead

and we had to hide. At least the danger gave me something else to think about.

Gerald Mortenhoe's school was at the top of a long slow hill. Tommy had been there to give shows, and remembered the approach. Katherine asked him to stop when he thought there was about half a mile to go.

"Find a place where we can get out without being seen. If the police did happen to be there and you drove us in, you'd be in trouble."

"Old fool like me, they'd only chew me up a bit."

"Please, Tommy. I wouldn't want you chewed up, not after all you've done for us."

"You know me. Never forget a face or a favor. . . . Besides, you're a real nice lady."

He drove on a bit, then turned off the road and bumped along some sort of rough track.

"It's not far from here. Just across the fields. You can see the school between them trees."

He stopped the van and we climbed out. "Tommy," I began, "you've been—"

"Just across a couple of fields. Not too difficult." He leaned closer. "And mind you look after her. She's not all that spry."

If he wouldn't be thanked, he wouldn't. "I'll do my best," I said.

Katherine called from a little distance away: "We'll miss you, Tommy."

"Huh. You'll be the first as ever has, then." He bashed his suffering gears into reverse. "Mind how you go."

"And you."

He ground away, his engine yowling fretfully. In the distance it changed its note, checked, and climbed again through the forward gears, fading into silence. Other cars passed, going up and down the hill. Birds sang. There was a smell of wild garlic warmed by the sun. Far overhead an airplane hissed in the wake of its own echo. I was alone with Katherine Mortenhoe, on a vague track, by two shapeless fields, below unnamed trees and an inconceivable school. I heard her move behind me, a rustling of clothes as if she were sitting down. I went toward her, feeling the space about me with my ears, my skin. Learning. My foot struck something soft. "I'm finding it harder to stand," she said.

But she got up again neatly enough when I helped her.

Halfway up the side of the second field he groped around and stopped.

"We're out of the sun here," he said. "Is it a high hedge? Would I be noticed if I stayed put?"

"I'll wait with you if you're tired."

"It's not that. I don't know your first husband. He doesn't know me. It would be better if you went on up alone."

"I'd rather you came with me." He'd said he'd look after her. He'd promised he'd look after her. "I can't do this alone. Please come with me."

Do what alone? Visit an old friend? Talk over old times? Or perhaps at last find someone she could fairly blame. . . . He went on with her up the side of the field and over the gate at the end. She placed his hands and he climbed it easily.

They were among the trees now, the wide rambling buildings of the school only a few hundred yards away, beyond the edge of the copse and across a graveled drive. Nothing moved. It was holiday time, the school empty. She leaned against a flimsy silver birch, gathering her strength. Then she went on between clumps of bluebells, Roddie close behind her. On the drive she paused. In front of her was a block of locked classrooms. She turned right and followed the drive around the side of a three-story laboratory unit. Big brass scales stood in the windows, and things in glass bottles. The drive widened into a turning space with grass in the middle and a tall aluminum abstract sculpture streaked with birdlime. She wondered if she should tell Roddie everything she was seeing. Where did one start?

"It's a nice school," she said inadequately. "There's . . . there's a sort of swooping roof over the main part and then flat blocks on either side. It's mostly blue. A green-blue. Turquoise really. . . ." She was so bad at it. "There are fir trees with swings on long ropes from the lower branches. . . ." She trailed off.

"I can smell the fir trees."

But she was seeing into the deep shadows under them. She lowered her voice. "And Gerald's standing under one of them. He looks very much the same. He thinks we haven't seen him. He's making up his mind what to do."

She led Roddie on across the gravel, toward the main entrance. The Gerald she remembered liked to enter any situation with his thoughts in order. They went together up

the shallow steps to the main entrance. The door was locked. Roddie stood quietly beside her, learning patience. She peered through the door's glass panel at the polished corridor within and waited for Gerald to make up his mind. Finally he did.

"Don't ring the bell." Behind her his feet approached across the gravel. "The porter won't—there's nobody to answer."

She caught the correction. What wouldn't the porter do? She turned. "I'd forgotten how tall you were, Gerald."

"It's been a long time."

She nodded. "Six years. . . . What won't the porter do, Gerald?"

He looked from Roddie to her and back again, and didn't answer.

"Gerald, this is Roddie."

"I thought it had to be."

Roddie held out his hand but Gerald stayed at the bottom of the steps, staring up. "Please don't be awkward," Katherine said.

Roddie took his hand back. "If he's been watching the show and he cares about you," he said, "you can hardly blame him."

She held tightly onto his arm. "Do you care about me? Do you care about me, Gerald?"

Suddenly Gerald moved and broke up the tableau. He turned and began to walk briskly away. "I'd rather you weren't seen," he said. "My part is around here. Please hurry. The police came early this morning—I was to get in touch with them the moment you turned up. . . ."

He walked fast, so that she had difficulty in following. Roddie stumbled, nearly fell. Ahead of them Gerald disappeared through a gate in a high woven fence. When she reached the gate she saw beyond it a dappled green garden bright with yellow spring flowers and the fallen, drifting petals of a cherry tree. She went in, drawing Roddie through after her. Gerald was waiting behind the gate and closed it. "You look terrible, Kath. Really terrible. What can I get you?"

The courage that had sustained her was suddenly all used up. She staggered and sank down, just where she was, on the grassy random stones of the path. Roddie stood beside her, one arm half-raised, quietly warding off.

When Tracey burst into the office she saw Vincent taking a chicken and mayonnaise sandwich from a piled plate on his desk. Beside the plate were two paper cups of coffee. Another man was standing by the window, his forehead pressed against the glass. Both men were physically relaxed. Neither was calm or composed.

"I can see there's no news," she said.

Nobody contradicted her. Vincent finished chewing his current mouthful and swallowed. "I gave orders that you weren't to be allowed up here."

"The girl on Reception has a husband. She feels about him the way I feel about mine."

The man at the window had turned. "I suppose it's all over the papers," he said.

"And the lunchtime news. How else would I know? You'd hardly expect our Vincent to tell a girl a thing like that. I'm only Roddie's wife, that's all."

Vincent took another sandwich. "You're not his wife. Perhaps you forget."

"Like I said once before, someone has to pick up the pieces."

The other man straightened and came toward her. "I'm Dr. Mason," he said. "Mrs. Mortenhoe was, still is, my patient. Believe me, we're doing everything we can. I have to get to her very soon, within the next few hours. Otherwise it'll be too late and she'll die."

"How can you save her? I thought . . ."

Vincent looked up, came in a little too sharply. "No doctor gives up hope, Tracey. Naturally Dr. Mason will do what he can. Which is why we're doing our damnedest to find her. To find them both."

"You mean you've paid for a death and now you're worried sick you won't be there."

But he wouldn't be needled. "You'll admit we paid handsomely, Tracey." He picked a shred of chicken from between his front teeth and stared at it. "You can hardly blame us for being concerned."

Dr. Mason moved convulsively. "No. No, I disassociate myself from that attitude completely. I can save her. If we find her in time I can—"

"You delude yourself, my dear Doctor. She has a terminal condition. I heard you tell her so myself."

Tracey looked at the two men. Power was being wielded:

the whole force of Vincent's personality, and something more besides. She knew his ways, his ruthlessness. Whatever their difference, the doctor would never have been a match for him. . . . Roddie, for all his courage and imagination, had never been a match for him either. She was there because Roddie needed her. Because any activity was better than waiting at home by the TV. Because she had felt she would be nearer to him there in Vincent's office than anywhere else. Now she saw there were other threads, complications she refused to guess at.

"Whatever you've done so far to find them," she said, "you must do it again. There'll be something you missed. You must go through it all again."

"Must? My dear Tracey—"

"You're tough, Vincent. I wonder if you're that tough. I wonder if you wouldn't rather know afterward that you'd done everything you could."

He looked at her sideways. "For the sake of the sponsors?"

"For the sake of any damn person you like."

He sighed, wiped his greasy fingers on his handkerchief, and reached for the telephone.

We sat in basket chairs, and ate salad out of wooden bowls. Or at least I did. I appreciated Gerald's thoughtfulness—I could scoop around with my fingers and not spill all that much over the sides. I'd never thought before how blind men ate. A wooden bowl and fingers seemed by far the best idea. And a glass on the ground beside me with wine in it they told me was white. I mean, it had to be, on a headmaster's lawn, chilled like that, and with salad. And with the sun warm on my face.

Gerald was kind: a big, impressive-feeling man. Even from the beginning he hadn't really been agin me, just waiting for a lead from Katherine. I might have been her old man of the sea for all he knew. For all I knew, maybe I was. But she gave no sign, so I chose to think not.

Not that she was one for signs. After all, she was dying—and I mean there, in that garden, dying—and she gave no sign of that either. At least, not to Gerald who might be expected to believe her. But I knew better. After her last rigor down by the van she'd been . . . different. Her breathing was different. There was no rhythm to it, to her walk-

ing, to her voice even. No continuity. It was as if she had to discover and then rediscover each necessary act as she went along. And the effort this required grew progressively greater. She was past rigor. She was past rigor, and paralysis, and coordination loss, and sweating, and double vision, and . . . I stopped myself. She was dying.

I knew what that meant. Of course I knew, every thinking person knew, what that meant. And boy, was I a thinking person. It meant ashes to ashes. It meant dust to dust. If the women don't get you the whiskey must.

I had no idea what it meant.

". . . Perhaps in a way things were made too easy," she was saying, "by us not having any children."

"How could we have had children? You seemed to have none of the qualities a mother needed."

Was it some kind of truth game they were playing, or had they always been so honest with each other? I scooped my salad and drank my wine.

"You didn't know everything about me, Gerald. But perhaps you were right about my qualities of motherhood."

"You have them now, Kath."

Their honesty made this a genuine compliment. Neither was it, in spite of her present situation, at all monstrous, just a nice, genuine compliment. "I hope you're right, Gerald. It's about time." Neither of them spoke for a while. Then, "You know, I'm glad you never remarried, Gerald."

"What difference would that have made?"

"I was thinking of my father. He remarried all the time."

"How very Freudian of you. . . . Was that why you left me? Because you thought you'd married your father and then found you hadn't?"

This was too much, even for her. "It was you who left me," she said.

"Under the meaning of the Act, perhaps. But you'd left already, a long time before that."

I heard her chair creak. I'd wondered at first if they found me, on account of my blindness, either more intrusive or less. I needn't have worried. They had more important things to think about. "You always wanted to change me, Gerald. I wasn't ready to be changed."

"In those days I was always in too much of a hurry."

"Please don't be smug." The concession wasn't enough. "Just look at me. There's a mechanism here, very much a

mechanism, and it's very much running down. Even you would be hard put to it to find much more."

"So you'd say you've not changed. You'd say you're here just because you're here."

"Not the clever schoolmaster stuff, Gerald. Not the Socratic method."

He sounded a nice man, comfortable in the sun, And she, Tommy Tucker had said, was a nice lady. I couldn't understand the way they talked. I wanted, presumptuously, to help them.

"She knows there's more than just a mechanism—" I had begun too loud, not pitching my voice quite right. "Ask her what the doctor told her. Ask her about the outrage."

"Roddie?" She sounded surprised I was there. "Outrage, Roddie? What gnomic word is this?"

She was, I recognized, playing to Gerald. "The outrage that is part of your condition," I said. "Dr. Mason described it very well. Don't forget I was there."

"You're wrong, Roddie. Neurological overload . . . burned-out circuits . . . these are my condition."

Gerald quickly recognized the difficulty between us. "The poet Dylan Thomas," he murmured, "is said to have died of 'insult to the brain.' At least, that is what they say appears on his death certificate. Insult or outrage . . . it's a very small step."

"Mystical nonsense, Gerald. We both know Thomas died of drink."

I should have noticed that she was protesting overmuch. I didn't. "Then there's your book," I insisted. "From what Peter told me there was outrage in every—"

"Book? There wasn't any book. . . . Anyway, I destroyed all my notes in that hotel. All that mattered. It was a silly thing, Gerald. Angry. Juvenile. A silly thing. . . ."

"But it tied in with what the doctor said. Surely you must remember?"

Something must have dulled me to her desperation. Possibly the wine. I wish I could find excuse in my blindness. Certainly, as soon as the words were spoken I would have taken them back. Gerald might press her hard, but not I. Now of all times, not I. I heard her move, felt the weight of her full attention pin me in my chair.

"I remember . . . remember all sorts of things." For all her firmness of voice she was tiring. "I remember, for in-

stance, that you worked under Vincent Ferriman. Mr. Ferriman is the most profoundly wicked, the most distressing person I have ever met. You worked under him. Willingly."

Her words didn't hurt me as much as they might have done. Accommodations that had once been made could not later be taken back. She had no right. But then, previously, neither had I. All the same, I'd already been through that one and reckoned I was out the other side. I'd lived with self-distaste far too long. So, though she was refusing to admit it, had Katherine Mortenhoe.

I said nothing. Eventually she turned back to Gerald.

"Peter's a . . . a dear boy," she said, "but he doesn't know a plot loop from a . . . a denouement phase. I've left him nothing to go on. Thank God."

Gerald had this curious ability not to need explanations. It was as if she came to him already footnoted. "I'm glad to hear it, Kath. Denials are a waste of time. You can't work with children without discovering that."

"Children?"

"They haven't had garbled Freud thrown at them. They're free to expect something bigger. They don't often find it, of course. But they search."

She might have accused him of mystical nonsense again. It was, after all, he who had quoted Freud at her not three minutes before. She was, I thought, fighting my battle for me, and that was what I would have done. But, "I'd have expected you to be the one to remarry," she said. "Not me."

"I don't believe you remarried. Any more than you dared do more than turn out computer books."

There was a long silence. When she spoke again it was the continuation of a private line of thought I didn't immediately follow. "I understand there have been . . . programs. You watched them. . . ." The words came very slowly, connected only with great effort. "Is that why . . . why we're here, talking? Is that why you didn't run to the police?"

"The programs made me very angry. Of course they made me angry. But the argument for turning you in now is that you need urgent medical help. I'd need more than anger with some wretched TV company to make me keep you from that."

"Pity, then?"

"I can't say I saw you as being pitiable."

"Then why?"

Uncharacteristically, he hesitated. Suddenly I saw what she was doing, and that her battle wasn't mine at all. She'd made her mind up on that one long before coming here and had already managed, with difficulty, to tell him so. Now she was asking for something else. She was asking him to acknowledge love. Of a husband, of a father, of a man, simply of a human being. She knew she had mine, but that was easier, born of mutual pain. She needed his, born of what she had been before, unlikable, shut away. I held my breath, willing him to feel it. A cuckoo called, very close, passing overhead.

At last he replied. "The choice wasn't mine at all, Kath. You made it for yourself, days ago. I could only respect it. I could only respect you for making it."

And still she waited. How nicely we pick over our words: love, admiration, regard, respect. . . . In my dictionary he loved her. But my dictionary took no account of the careful, protective intelligence of these two strange people. Their precisions weren't cold. Theirs was a relationship fourteen years deep, interrupted but not yet ended. He was Gerald Mortenhoe and she Katherine. My reasoning had been cheap, making her hope for the word love. Rather had she to risk his offering, for her sake, for easy comfort, the mere word. The word that would devalue them both. She had to tempt him.

The silence lengthened. I suppose I had come with her to that place, to that man, expecting sensational revelations, Clearly he knew she was dying. It can't have been easy, but he held out.

Vincent's office was crowded. Tracey looked around at the pitiful few people conceivably capable of helping who had been brought together there at her insistence. Mrs. Mortenhoe's husband, Harry; her assistant at Computabook, Peter; her doctor, Dr. Mason; and finally, as a long shot, Roddie's psychiatrist, Dr. Klausen. Dr. Mason was lecturing them, his concern painful to watch, while Vincent sat at his desk reading a sheaf of program reviews, his unconcern equally painful.

"If we can find her I can save her. Deep narcosis possibly. A reversal of patterns. *It can be done.* I know Dr.

Klausen here will agree it must be tried. But we don't have much time. We—"

"What I cannot understand," said Dr. Klausen mildly, "is how this situation could ever have arisen."

Vincent looked up from his clippings. "A medical matter," he said. "Hardly one for this present discussion. Naturally Dr. Mason accepts full responsibility. An error of judgment, shall we say? They have been known, even in the medical profession."

Tracey wanted to help: not Vincent, never Vincent—but then, Vincent would never need her help. "We're not here to hand out blame," she said. "We're here to think of some way of finding Mrs. Mortenhoe. And my husband."

"And to do that," Dr. Mason repeated, "we must all search in our minds for the smallest thing she may have said, the vaguest clue she may have given, the slightest deduction any of us might make from what we know of her."

There was an uneasy silence in the room. Harry shifted peevishly. "Quite mad," he said. "That's the only deduction I'd care to make. One moment we're all set for Tasmania, the next moment she'd run away, tarted herself up like I don't know what, no thought for me, no thought for how I might look, stuck there in that shop like—"

"I take it she was usually considerate of your feelings?" Dr. Klausen had already sized up Harry.

"Of course she was. We were married. Happily married. How else—"

"Then we are looking for atypical behavior, certainly stemming from her atypical situation. Even in this, though, we ought to be able to find some sort of logic. She seems to have been an intensely logical person. . . . I wonder, was she running *away,* or running *to?* Was she basically afraid or, as we say, looking forward?"

Harry actually laughed. "Looking forward to what? The gutter? I tell you, she was crazy. Of course she was. She couldn't face the truth, so she ran away."

Up to that moment Peter had been quiet. Now he sprang to his feet. "No. You would say that. All you think about is the fool she made you look. You never knew anything about her, anything at all."

"And you did, I suppose."

"Yes. Yes, I did."

The two men glared at each other. Then Harry turned to Vincent. "I didn't want to come here. Must I put up with—"

"My dear Harry. Please . . . we must remember that Peter was the last among us to see your wife. It is just possible that he knows something the rest of us do not."

Peter sat down again. "All I know is . . . is that she wasn't in the least crazy. Or afraid. Yes, she *was* looking forward to . . . to whatever was going to happen to her."

Harry snorted. Klausen had been reading over the notes Vincent had provided for him. "Peter—you talked with her for four or five minutes. Was there nothing she said in all that time that seemed to you *odd* in any way? Inconsequent? Not what you'd have expected?"

Peter struggled with his memory. "Everything she said was a bit . . . disjointed." Harry snorted again. Peter plowed on. "But I understood her perfectly well. She was saying just that—that she wasn't running *away,* but running *to.* . . . I said I'd help her if I could. For some reason this made her cry. I lent her my handkerchief."

Harry crossed his legs. "Must we have these touching—"

"And then—yes, she did say a funny thing. She said, 'I'm not an armed destroyer.' Something like that. 'I'm not an armed destroyer.' "

Harry sighed. *"Armored cruiser,"* he said. "You might as well get it right. She would have said that. It always preyed on her mind. It was what her first husband had called her. You may say I didn't know anything about her, but at least . . ." He trailed off, aware of a change in the atmosphere of the room.

Dr. Klausen sat back, took off his glasses. "As simple as that," he said. "A sensitive woman who did not want to be thought of as *an armored cruiser.*"

"My dear Klausen." Vincent shuffled papers on his desk. "My dear Klausen, you'll see if you look at your notes that we covered that possibility right at the beginning. We're not complete fools. The police called on Gerald Mortenhoe and left instructions that they were to be contacted at once, should his ex-wife turn up."

"Would he have obeyed these instructions? Would any man in his position?"

"He's a responsible citizen. I'm sure the police explained the situation to him."

"But you have to admit that his loyalties would be, to say the least, divided?"

Vincent patiently put away his press cuttings and, in the manner of someone humoring an extremely wayward child, got in touch once again with the Air Transport Controller.

Lunch was long over. She wondered if Gerald had noticed how she had eaten nothing. She'd felt that to eat would be . . . unsuitable. Since then they had sat on, the three of them, in the sun, saying less and less. They made her feel safe. She remembered Gerald's strength, had resisted it before, could have resisted it again. It came from being of a piece. But she, unready, had resisted him, worn him down, driven him away. She no longer felt ashamed of this, for nothing—not even he—could have hurried her.

Roddie's strength was different. It was without reason, obstinate in the face of self-disillusionment. It came from an intuitive certainty that beyond all the fragmentation there was still the possibility of . . . wholeness. It had faltered, and taken wrong turnings, but it had never lost faith in the possibility.

So she sat, the three of them sat, in the dappled green garden, and her mind that had been running away with her faster and faster, from way back, slowed, and examined each individual necessity. She experienced herself. She was one. She was as old as the soil beneath the grass beneath her feet. She was home. She could have gone on living forever—one breath after another was all that was needed—but it seemed much more reasonable, and gentle, and wise, to die.

I suppose I had imagined my hearing would become immediately one hundred percent better, just because I was blind. It wasn't so, of course. No sooner had I decided tactfully not to mention the first faint approaching clatter of the helicopter than Gerald mentioned it for me.

"It doesn't matter now," he said. "They're too late. Thank God."

And I was hurt. More than anything else at that moment, I was hurt. That I shouldn't have known. That she shouldn't have told me.

Simply because there'd been less and less to say, we'd

been saying less and less. But there should have been a moment, something more than just a mere cessation, that I in my closeness, in my blind closeness, might have known. An event between us. An importance. As if there hadn't been enough events and importances.

But I was hurt, and stood up, knocking over something, a table, something that had been too close. My eyes cried. I ran across the grass toward the approaching, egg-beating clatter. And stopped. She was dead, and I ought to have known better. I did know better. I did.

Gerald came after me only slowly. He didn't snatch or pull. "They'll come down in the playing field by the gym," he said. "It'll be some minutes before they get here."

I had a sudden, precise, imaginary picture from the helicopter now low over the trees. The school with its swooping roof and blue glass, turquoise really; the lawn behind its woven fence, striped neatly, shadowed with foreshortened trees; us, staring up; near us Kate, Katie-Mo, Kathie, Kath, Katherine. . . .

"She's all right?" I asked, ashamed now.

He caught my meaning at once. "Tired," he said. "Nothing more."

Anyway, how could it matter? Hadn't I seen puke and shit and piss, and loved her? He led me back across the lawn and let me help him pick up the table I had spilled. Groping around, I found bowls and cutlery. I set them on the table, carefully, the right way up. Then we sat down to wait.

I don't know what he was waiting for. Me, in all the shouting and anger and confusion that followed, I was listening for just one voice. I heard Vincent, and the doctor too late to do his irrelevant doctoring. Both of them were to avoid me: Vincent I would hear from later, through NTV's solicitors; Dr. Mason, for his own unexplained reasons, never. I heard some cameraman, worrying about the light. Then I heard Tracey. She was very close to me, and spoke softly.

"You've come back," she said.

I hadn't, of course. Nothing is that easy. But I was well on the way.

DEC 30 1982

A forgotten SF classic that exposed the pitfalls of voyeuristic entertainment decades before the reality show craze.

A few years in the future, medical science has advanced to the point where it is practically unheard of for people to die of any cause except old age. The few exceptions provide the fodder for a new kind of television show for avid audiences who lap up the experience of watching someone else's dying weeks. So when Katherine Mortenhoe is told that she has about four weeks to live, she knows it's not just her life she's about to lose but her privacy as well.